HOW A REALIST HERO
REBUILT THE KINGDOM
IX
Dojyomaru
Illust. Fuyuyuki

IX

HOW A REALIST HERO REBUILT THE KINGDOM

Dojyomaru

Illust. Fuyuyuki

Fuuga Haan
"I AM FUUGA HAAN, KING OF MALMKHITAN!"

WORLD MAP
HOW A REALIST HERO REBUILT THE KINGDOM
DEMON LORD'S DOMAIN
NOTHUNG DRAGON KNIGHT KINGDOM
UNION OF EASTERN NATIONS
GRAN CHAOS EMPIRE
(White Line Includes Vassal States)
STAR DRAGON MOUNTAIN RANGE
KINGDOM OF FRIEDONIA
MERCENARY STATE ZEM
REPUBLIC OF TURGIS
NINE HEADED DRAGON ARCHIPELAGO UNION
DEMON LORD'S DOMAIN
DUCHY OF CHIMA
MALMKHITAN
KINGDOM OF LASTANIA
NOTHUNG DRAGON KNIGHT KINGDOM
UNION OF EASTERN NATIONS
STAR DRAGON MOUNTAIN RANGE
KINGDOM OF FRIEDONIA
Red Dragon City
Randel
AMIDONIA REGION
ELFRIEDEN REGION

HOW A REALIST HERO REBUILT THE KINGDOM

IX

Aisha Udgard

Female dark elf warrior. Boasting the greatest martial ability in the kingdom, she is Souma's second queen-to-be and also his bodyguard.

Juna Doma

The Prima Lorelei, with the greatest singing voice in the Kingdom of Friedonia. Intends to become Souma's first secondary queen.

Roroa Amidonia

Princess of the former Principality of Amidonia. The third queen-to-be who also supports Souma with her rare economic sense.

Naden Delal

Black ryuu girl from the Star Dragon Mountain Range. Having formed a dragon knight contract with Souma, she is his second secondary queen-to-be.

Souma Kazuya

Young man summoned from another world. With the throne suddenly thrust upon him, he rules the Kingdom of Friedonia.

Liscia Elfrieden

Princess of the former Elfrieden Kingdom. Realizing Souma's talent, she resolves to support him as his first queen.

Hakuya Kwonmin

The Kingdom of Friedonia's "Black-robed Prime Minister." With a wealth of knowledge in various fields, he handles military and political strategy, as well as foreign affairs.

Tomoe Inui

Little mystic wolf girl. With the discovery of her gift that allows her to talk to animals, she is adopted as Liscia's little sister.

Kaede Foxia

A mage attached to the Kingdom of Friedonia's National Defense Force and Ludwin's second-in-command. Is engaged to Hal.

Halbert Magna

The Kingdom of Friedonia's National Defense Force's sole dragon knight, and captain of the elite Dratroopers unit. Called Hal for short.

Kuu Taisei

Son of the Republic of Turgis's head of state. Is staying with his ally Souma as a guest, in order to learn from his rule.

Ruby

Red dragon girl from the Star Dragon Mountain Range. Formed a dragon knight contract with Hal, becoming his second fiancée.

Taru Ozumi

Blacksmith from the Republic of Turgis and Kuu and Leporina's childhood friend. Currently teaches smithing in Friedonia.

Leporina

Kuu's servant and bodyguard. Having followed Kuu from a young age, she is now staying in the Kingdom of Friedonia.

Ivan Juniro

The actor who plays Overman SIlvan. Using magic that produces illusions like lights and explosions, he puts on a flashy hero show.

Overman Silvan

The superhero in the Kingdom of Friedonia's hero program, Overman Silvan. He fights against the evil Black Group.

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Prologue: Tora and Tiger

Beneath the high sky on a warm, clear day, the winter was drawing near.

The Dabicon River shone in the sunlight as a procession of troops belonging to the Kingdom of Friedonia moved east along it. They marched at a confident pace, but not hurrying.

The demon wave was a phenomenon in which a great number of monsters were flowing out of the Demon Lord's Domain in the north.

Our forces from the Kingdom of Friedonia were coming to aid the Union of Eastern Nations, which was being struck by the demon wave.

Just the other day, we had gone to one of the areas of intense fighting, the Kingdom of Lastania. Working with local forces, we had succeeded in eliminating a swarm of monsters. We were now heading toward the other area that had seen intense fighting, the Duchy of Chima.

Having received a report in the Kingdom of Lastania that they were facing a crisis situation, I had sent the Wyvern Cavalry and Dratroopers ahead and placed a heavy focus on speed as we hurried to have the troops march. But then word came that the forces of the Union of Eastern Nations had gathered in the Duchy of Chima, and it was unlikely to fall immediately, so we were now proceeding at a normal marching pace so as not to break ranks.

As the one who was, for official purposes, leading this force (though the one taking actual command was Ludwin), I had joined the procession on horseback.

There were sturdy carriages for the higher-up, but being in a carriage the whole time would have made my shoulders stiff, so I was riding a horse so that I could move around.

Naden was sitting in front of me as I held the reins. "Wow, who knew you could ride a horse?"

I had mostly been riding Naden in her ryuu form lately, but I couldn't match pace with the army that way, so we were riding a horse together this time.

I felt embarrassed when she complimented me on my skill with a horse,

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so I scratched at my cheek. “My teacher, Owen, taught me well.”

“Hmm, this is kind of new. Normally, I’m the one giving you a ride, but now you’re giving me one. This is nice, too, in its own way.” Naden leaned back against me.

When Naden’s head got closer to mine, her glossy, black hair gave off a pleasant scent. I rested my chin between Naden’s two antlers. When I moved my chin around a little in that position, Naden let out a sigh in weird voice. “Ahhhhh...”

While I was playing with Naden, a horse approached from behind.

“You look like you’re having fun,” said the horse’s rider.

This was a blue-haired beauty who was the sole person wearing a marine uniform in this military procession: our Prima Lorelei, Juna.

“I’m a little jealous that you get to have a leisurely ride with His Majesty,” she went on.

“I’ll trade places with you later,” Naden said.

“Hee hee! Please do. If I ride, maybe I should be the one in back.”

While listening to Juna talk cheerfully, I smiled wryly. “I was sure you’d be going back with Excel.”

Excel had done a great service for us in the Kingdom of Lastania, and then been stubbornly resistant to return home afterward. Having foreseen that, my prime minister, Hakuya, had sent Excel’s granddaughter, Juna, to come collect her.

I had expected her to go back to Parnam with Excel, but now she was accompanying us instead.

Juna gave me a charming smile. “If Roroa has returned to the castle, there’s no reason I should have to, too. I will be staying with you from here on, sire.”

I smiled. “That’s reassuring for me, but... Excel’s going to get miffed about it.”

In fact, Excel was probably complaining, *And here I am, going home quietly!* right this moment.

Juna gave me with a *very nice smile.* “It will do Grandmother some good. She’s always playing around too much, despite her old age.”

“There’s a line I’d be too scared to say myself,” I confessed. “Especially the part about her age.”

“Ahaha! You do get it!” Naden, whose age was as much of an unknown

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as Excel's, laughed.

While we were talking about that, Aisha came up on a horse. "Your Majesty, a message for you from Sir Ludwin. There is a request from a nearby town saying, 'We are surrounded by monsters and would like to ask for help.'"

"Again?" I sighed.

The effects of the demon wave were spread along the Dabicon River, which served as the border with the Demon Lord's Domain. In short, there was fighting all over.

Even if most places weren't facing a crisis on the same scale as the Kingdom of Lastania or the Duchy of Chima, there were obviously going to be places that couldn't slay all of the monsters on their own.

There was an endless stream of requests from such places, and as we were here in response to a request from the Empire to provide aid, we had to respond to each one.

"How many?" I asked.

"Around a hundred," Aisha reported. "If we send out the wyvern cavalry, they can scatter them instantly."

"We'll have to send Hal and his men again, I guess... Okay. Tell him he has my permission."

"Yes, sir. Understood."

Aisha's horse raced to the front of the procession. When there was a request for aid, we deployed a unit with high mobility, like the wyvern cavalry or regular cavalry, and had them rejoin this main force when the enemy were defeated. This was another reason we couldn't pick up our marching speed too much.

"I knew it would be, but monster slaying is tiresome work," I commented.

"Unlike war, it doesn't end when you break the enemy's main force," Juna agreed.

"That's right." I nodded. "It's a pain, but we can't leave them be. We have to nip trouble in the bud as much as possible."

"Yes. I think you're right."

"If Ruby gets tired, let's go, too," Naden put in. "I'll drop some lightning on them and scatter them."

"Yeah," I said, looking up to watch a unit of wyvern cavalry flying off into the eastern sky. "I'm counting on you."

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Meanwhile, as Souma and his party were heading to the Duchy of Chima...

In the area around Wedan, the capital of the Duchy of Chima, an intense battle was being fought again today.

The strategy being used in the Duchy of Chima during this demon wave was essentially the same as the one used by Julius in the Kingdom of Lastania. The armed forces abandoned all the places that would be difficult to hold, concentrating their forces in Wedan and preparing for a siege.

However, the Duchy of Chima had two things the Kingdom of Lastania did not: the solid Wedan Castle, and reinforcements from the Union of Eastern Nations that they had gained through skillful diplomacy.

In order to use these two things effectively, Duke Chima had deliberately allowed the monsters to approach Wedan Castle, and worked with the reinforcements from the union to meet them there. The back-and-forth battle between the monsters and the united forces of the Union of Eastern Nations was ongoing.

There were eyes watching the battle which continued on today, from a distance.

From atop a tall tree in among the trees on a hill that overlooked the field of battle, there stood a great man clad in black armor and wearing a black tiger mask.

This was the leader of the Kingdom of Friedonia's clandestine operatives, the Black Cats.

Hm... The union's forces are doing a good job defending against the monsters. With eyes shining beneath the mask, Kagetora observed the battlefield.

Faced with an untold thousands of monsters, the ragtag forces of the union seemed to be putting up a good fight. However, Kagetora had his arms crossed in dissatisfaction.

They are putting up a good fight, he reflected. *However, with each force fighting as it pleases, they lack efficiency. If the king of some country were to lead an alliance, and organize this force, they could surely reduce the number of casualties...*

Then he shook his head.

But considering how the union's combined force was formed, it would be impossible.

If someone could be credited with the creation of this force from the Union of Eastern Nations, it would likely be Duke Chima with his request for reinforcements. However, the Duchy of Chima was a small country, and no matter how capable they were at diplomacy, they did not have the power to take the head of a coalition and unify the forces of each country under their command.

Meanwhile, if the country with the most forces were to try and take command, the other countries that were trying to distinguish themselves and win the reward of one of the Chima siblings would push back against it.

Because of that, each country was paying with not-insignificant losses as each fought as they pleased in order to win acclaim.

It was a style of fighting that brought massive damage to the enemy, but also to one's allies as well. If they continued like this, there would inevitably be places where their forces collapsed... or so he had thought.

But it has yet to happen...

In contrast to Kagetora's expectations, the forces of the union had not collapsed anywhere. That was because anywhere that it seemed there might be a collapse, *those people* would *jump in.*

If you squinted at the battlefield, there was something there, jumping around like fleas. Not just one or two of them. There were more than a thousand of them traversing the battleground freely, literally jumping around from place to place. When those people reached a point that looked ready to collapse, the tides of battle were instantly reversed, and the forces that were close to breaking recovered. He had seen it happen several times on the battlefield in front of him.

Kagetora felt a sudden presence behind him.

"Master Kagetora." One of the members of the Black Cats, wearing the black mask and outfit of a ninja, landed on a branch behind him. "We have determined their identity."

"Let's hear it." Kagetora had ordered the Black Cats to investigate the ones jumping around that battlefield.

The Black Cat reported his findings. "The ones who are jumping around the battlefield are leaping cavalry from the nomadic state of Malmkhitan,

from the steppes to the east of here."

"Malmkhitan... That's not a name I've heard."

"Their country was only just formed before the creation of the Union of Eastern Nations, so there has been little chance for talk of them to spread."

Then the operative began to explain the events leading to the formation of the steppe state of Malmkhitan.

On the formation of the steppe nation of Malmkhitan in the Union of Eastern Nations...

The area where Malmkhitan would eventually form was originally populated by many small nomadic tribes. Before the formation of the Union of Eastern Nations, these tribes warred with each other at times, formed blood ties through marriage, and went through a series of destructions and unifications.

Whenever an enemy tribe was destroyed, it was not completely annihilated, but instead absorbed into the conquering tribe in its weakened state, allowing the population of the steppes to be maintained without too much of a decline.

The many small tribes often warred, but they had a strong sense of being a common steppe people, and so whenever outsiders invaded, the tribes would unite to eliminate the external threat.

Meanwhile, those tribes on the edge of the steppe traded with outside countries, invited in skilled people, and traded in slaves. This brought in foreign blood, but they worked to ensure it did not become too prominent. It was a region that had a closed-off mentality that placed value on steppe traditions, while also embracing and absorbing events from the outside world.

The people of this region were of diverse races. The human, dwarven, and beastmen races were all represented, but because many tribes had died out or were integrated, the majority of people were a mixture of human and beastman blood.

The most common people looked human, aside from beast ears or tails, or they had small wings growing from their backs. The latter might make one think of angels, but the feathers were more often black or brown, so they looked more like crow tengu.

When these steppe tribes saw the nations of the north fall after the appearance of the Demon Lord's Domain and the southward advance of the

monsters, they felt a sense of crisis.

The existence of a foreign threat greater than any before gave birth to an unprecedented sense that the steppe tribes must unite as one. And as they experienced events similar to the demon wave that would come four years later, that sense was suddenly heightened, so all the tribes of the steppes were united.

The largest and most powerful of the steppe tribes, the Haan, was at the center. And the head of the Haan was Raiga Haan. So, with all of the tribes that supported him, Raiga eliminated any tribes opposed to unification and founded the steppe state of Malmkhitan.

However, Malmkhitan could not prepare to face the threat of the demon wave alone. So it acceded to the Union of Eastern Nations, which formed to prepare for the threat of the Demon Lord's Domain, becoming a medium-sized state inside the union.

And then Raiga, the overlord of the steppes, finally ran out of luck. He suddenly passed away that winter.

He was forty at the time of his death. It was said to be death by illness or poison, but the rumor that he was poisoned spread especially widely.

Perhaps the rumor was perpetrated by a remnant of one of the lesser tribes he'd destroyed in unifying the steppe, or perhaps the assassination had happened because of another chief's jealousy of Raiga having become their overlord. The truth was unclear. Raiga had been beloved by many of the steppe people, but he had also made many enemies.

And thus, Raiga was succeeded by his twenty-two-year-old son.

Kagetora listened quietly as the Black Cat operative relayed the story of Malmkhitan's founding. When he had heard it all, he asked a question.

"I understand what this Malmkhitan country is. But what are those leaping cavalry you mentioned?"

"The leaping cavalry are a powerful type of cavalry used by Malmkhitan," said the operative. "They're not horses, but a type of goat-like, cow-like creature... a massive horned riding beast known as a 'temsbock.' These temsbocks are raised in Malmkhitan, and they have the strength to leap up a castle wall in three bounds."

"Hm... Then those temsbocks are the things jumping around the battlefield?" Kagetora let out a groan of admiration. "They are cavalry, but

like wyvern cavalry, they fly through the skies of the battlefield. Their ability to suddenly appear and disappear must be incredibly confusing for the enemy. I can see they would be a difficult type of soldier to deal with."

"Yes, sir," said the operative. "The fact is, countries that have invaded the steppe in the past, despite an overwhelming numerical advantage, have been beaten badly by the leaping cavalry."

It's not hard to see why... thought Kagetora. When he saw how the leaping cavalry was traveling across the battlefield freely, butchering monsters, it was very convincing. *I must report to the master that this is not a country to be taken lightly.*

Having determined that, Kagetora turned to ask the Black Cat operative another question. "And what is the name of this son that succeeded—Ah!"

Kagetora suddenly drew the tachi Souma had given him. While the operative was still shocked at him suddenly drawing his weapon, Kagetora swung the blade. When he did...

Whoosh! Clang!

...his Tachi cut down an arrow that came at them suddenly.

"Wha?! Where did that come from?!" The operative panicked, apparently anticipating a surprise attack when he saw the severed arrow fall to the ground, but there were no enemies to be seen, and he couldn't sense anyone in hiding, either.

Unlike the worried operative, Kagetora exhaled, returning his sword to its sheath. Looking to the battlefield, he let out a sigh of admiration. "To think they could reach this far from there..."

"From there?! You can't be serious!"

The operative looked where Kagetora was looking, and his eyes went wide.

Kagetora's eyes were on the distant battlefield. Did he mean to say someone on the battlefield had sensed their presence several kilometers away and then managed to get an arrow, even one with its range extended by magic, to reach them?

If someone like that existed, that person was the greater monster here.

"Now, what was the son's name?" Kagetora asked.

The operative came to his senses and hurriedly replied. "H-His son's name is Fuuga Haan. I have heard he is a hero with a rare physique and strength unrivaled on the steppe, who fights with a long-handled weapon with

a curved blade. I also heard that Fuuga's mount is not a temsbock, but a flying tiger, or something like that."

"A flying tiger... I see..."

Kagetora turned a stern eye on the battlefield.

If so, that must be it...

It was on the battlefield near Wedan, where man and monster endlessly fought to the death.

In the middle of the unceasing shouts and sounds of fighting, a young man in his early twenties held a great bow that no ordinary person could even draw.

He stood at least a hundred and ninety centimeters tall, and his tanned limbs were thick with muscle. He had short, bluish-black hair, and a majestic face. The young man who wore silver armor over his red leather clothes, and a bowl-shaped silver helm on his head had small white wings on his back.

He drew attention himself, but his mount did, too.

It was a white tiger so great that people looked up at it.

While its master drew his bow, that tiger batted away incoming monsters with its paws. It was like a cat playing with a ball, but the fact that these monsters were larger than a grown man made the sight frightening.

A young commander on a temsbock approached this man and beast who were so clearly a cut above the rest. "What's the matter, Lord Fuuga? Why suddenly fire in such an odd direction?"

"Hm?" said Fuuga. "Oh, Shuukin."

The great man riding on the tiger was Fuuga Haan, the young king of the steppe nation of Malmkhitan, and the leader of the magnificent temsbock cavalry. The other man was his confidant and same-age friend, the brave commander Shuukin.

Looking down at Shuukin from atop his massive tiger, Fuuga wore a bold smile. "Oh, it's simple. I felt something watching me from that hill, so I tried taking a shot at it."

"You tried taking a shot at it? What if it was a civilian, or one of our allies?!"

Shuukin was aghast, but Fuuga laughed it off jovially. "Ha ha ha! No civilian would be near this battlefield. We didn't have a unit or scouts up on that hill, either."

“Well, yes, but...”

Shuukin seemed unconvinced by his reasoning, but Fuuga smiled wryly as he went on.

“Well, if they’re over there, they’re not one of ours, at least. More importantly, though, Shuukin, it looks like the forces are under pressure on the northeast side. Let’s pop over there and deal with it nice and quick. We’re going, Durga!”

His favored mount, the flying tiger Durga, took off.

“Ah! Lord Fuuga!” Flustered, Shuukin gave a command to his subordinates. “Don’t let the king go alone! We’re following after him!”

Thus did the Malmkhitan temsbock cavalry jump across the battlefield, dragged around by Fuuga and Durga.

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Chapter 1: Meeting in the Sky

“Look, Souma!” Naden called. “There’s only smoke coming from over there!”

“Hey, you’re right.”

When I looked ahead to see what Naden in her ryuu form was talking about, there was indeed smoke on the wasteland spreading out near the foot of a mountain.

It was likely dust kicked up by a battle. When countless people and monsters ran around, tearing up the ground, the sand danced into the air. Did that mean Wedan Castle was on that mountain?

According to the report from Kagetora, countless monsters... basically, a whole lot of them... were descending on Wedan. To explain, there were various monsters of large and small species attacking, so a precise count was impossible in the current situation.

In terms of the area they covered, as seen from the air, it was apparently around the same as an army of 60,000 soldiers. The 30,000 or so troops from the Union of Eastern Nations that Duke Chima had lured in using his six highly capable children as bait were holding them off for now.

Though the monsters had an overwhelming numerical advantage, the forces of the union were fighting in formation, focusing on defending, so while they couldn’t go on the offensive, they were still doing a good job of defending. The monsters only attacked with brute force, so that made defending easy.

As for the reinforcements we were bringing from the Kingdom of Friedonia, they numbered 50,000. If we could perform a pincer attack together with the forces of the union, Kagetora anticipated we could quickly exterminate the horde of monsters.

The important thing was the timing of that pincer attack. In order to obtain a quick victory, we needed to coordinate with forces on the union’s side.

That was why, in order to have a meeting about it, I was riding on Naden’s back, with a group of wyvern cavalry led by Hal and Ruby

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defending us as we headed to Wedan, the capital of the Duchy of Chima.

The word was that we had no fear of Wedan falling for the time being, so we didn't need to perform an attack from the sky with the Dratroopers like we had in Lasta, so we could land at Wedan Castle as-is.

The arrangements to allow that (which included temporarily disabling the anti-air repeating bolt throwers) had been handled by the Black Cats, arriving ahead of us.

"CQ, CQ," I said, speaking into the communication tube coming out of the gondola that Naden was carrying. "You there, Kaede?"

"Yes, yes, I'm here. What does 'seek you' mean?" Kaede answered immediately.

Naden was carrying a gondola under her belly, and inside were Aisha, Juna, Tomoe, her guardian Inugami, Kaede, and the pair from Turgis who had forced their way into coming with us, Kuu and Leporina.

"Oh... don't worry about that," I said. "So, anyway, Kaede, there's a dust cloud ahead. Is it okay to assume that's the battlefield in the Duchy of Chima?"

"Let's see... It is, you know. I've just confirmed on the map. It looks like the Duchy of Chima's castle is located halfway up the mountain you see ahead of us."

"I see... Got it. Thanks."

As I closed the communication tube, I was able to see a city spread out halfway up the small mountain to the west. The castle resembled Castor's in Red Dragon City. It made effective use of the terrain, and even if a large force surrounded them, it was a stronghold that would not fall easily.

"Souma!" Naden suddenly shouted inside my head. "Watch out! Something's coming at us fast!"

"Something, at this high altitude?"

In order to avoid being attacked, we were flying at a higher altitude than monsters could reach.

Hal brought the large red dragon Ruby up beside us. "Souma. It sounds like Ruby senses something."

"I feel something intensely powerful down below," Ruby explained telepathically.

"Yeah, Naden was saying that, too," I nodded. "We should watch out, Hal."

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“Gotcha. Everyone, hallllllt!”

Hearing Hal’s bellowed order, Naden and I, Hal and Ruby, and the wyvern knights stopped advancing and held position.

Unlike Naden, who floated with some power we didn’t understand, Ruby and the wyverns gained lift from their wings, so in order to hold position, they had to flap them loudly. It was exhausting, so they couldn’t hover in one place for long.

“It’s coming,” Ruby notified us.

Looking down, there was something coming our way, *leaping up* toward us.

In no time, the giant white tiger closed in.

“Wait, isn’t it kind of huge?!” I shouted.

It should have still been a long way off, but I could make out the shape of it clearly, so I initially doubted my eyes and sense of distance. However, as it approached, I realized it was far larger than what I would ever imagine a tiger to be. It might’ve been as massive as a numoth. (A mammoth-like creatures from Turgis.)

Looking closely, the fluffy paws of its front and hind legs were also sparking with electricity. It was jumping off the air with those legs, so I just had to accept that this was the kind of creature it was.

“How can a tiger fly without wings?!” Naden cried.

“You’re the one who’s going to say that, Naden?!” Ruby shot back with exasperation.

Well, since Naden could fly without wings, it wasn’t so weird that a tiger could bound through the sky... I guess?

Then I realized someone was riding the white tiger.

That person was a well-built man who wore red leather clothing with shining silver armor over the top, along with a crystal-embedded bowl-shaped helm on his head.

He likely was not human. He had a small pair wings, white with black tips like a crane’s, sprouting out of his back. He had a weapon like the Green Dragon Crescent Blade from the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* in his hands, and a gold-engraved greatbow hanging from his hip.

What’s this oppressive feeling...?

His burly physique, his command of his mount, and the weapon he used, they all spoke volumes about how unusual this man was.

Hal readied his weapon, saying, “Watch yourself, Souma. Something feels abnormal here.”

I nodded. “Got it.”

According to Owen, my instructor in the martial arts, I was “little better than a fresh recruit.” Yet even I felt something from that man that put me on edge, so Hal had to be even more tense.

“Huh?” Naden began.

“What is it, Nad—Whuh?!”

In the same moment as Naden let out a cry of surprise, something red suddenly blocked my field of vision.

I reeled with shock, but on closer inspection it was Aisha’s red loincloth. It seemed she had come out of the gondola below and climbed up here.

“Hey, that’s dangerous!” I hurriedly got up on my knees, hugging Aisha around the waist. “It’s beyond reckless, coming up here without a lifeline.”

“We can’t afford to be saying that, sire,” she shot back. “That man is dangerous.”

Aisha didn’t take her eyes off him.

Was he so good that even Aisha, by far the best warrior in our country, had to be wary of him?

Back when Aisha had met Jeanne, someone even Juna had admitted she was no match for, Aisha hadn’t been this wary.

Whatever the case, I fastened my belt to Aisha’s, using a robe with metal fittings. That would keep her safe if she slipped, at least.

With no time to feel relieved, the man on the white tiger charged forward, his weapon pointed our way, and shouted loudly. “I ask you! For what purpose do you come to this land?!”

It was a forceful voice, and more youthful than I’d expected. From the look of him, I had expected a battle hardened warrior, but it was the face of a young man in his mid-twenties that peered out from beneath the helm.

“My name is Fuuga Haan! King of Malmkhitan!” he declared.

Even in front of a ryuu, a dragon, and about a hundred wyvern cavalry, the man who gave his name as Fuuga asked me that without a hint of fear. I could tell he was truly bold, and had incredible grit. Little wonder Aisha was wary.

“We of Malmkhitan have come to Wedan to answer Duke Chima’s call for aid,” Fuuga bellowed. “Seeing as you have brought wyverns, a dragon,

and another mount I am not familiar with, you cannot possibly be part of the Union of Eastern Nations. Again, I ask you! On what business have you come to this battlefield?!"

I turned to the communication tube and asked, "Kaede. Tell me about Malmkhitan."

"It's a medium-sized country in the Union of Eastern Nations. A nomadic state from the steppe, I hear."

"Then that man is the king of a nation, right?"

"He calls himself a king, so I guess he must be..."

In that case, he and I were of equal status.

I raised my voice so Fuuga could hear me. "Sir Fuuga! We are from the Kingdom of Friedonia to the south! At the request of the Gran Chaos Empire, we have come to aid the Duchy of Chima, which we hear is suffering the effects of the demon wave!"

"Reinforcements? ...Aw, they're friendlies." For some reason, Fuuga slumped his shoulder in disappointment.

Reshouldering his crescent blade, he approached at a leisurely pace. When he came close enough we could make out each other's faces, I saw that he was handsome, with sharp eyes.

"'Aw, they're friendlies?'" I repeated. "Why do you sound disappointed by that?"

Fuuga gave a wry laugh. "Lately, I've had nothing but small fry to fight, and it's boring. Here I got my hopes up, thinking I'd finally found an enemy worth fighting... but you're an ally, so we can't go at it, right?"

Even as he said that, Fuuga was eyeing Aisha and Hal. They glared back at Fuuga, wariness dripping from their faces.

Meanwhile, Naden the black ryuu and Ruby the red dragon were staring down the sky-jumping white tiger that Fuuga rode. They all roared lowly, baring their fangs to intimidate.

It was like a showdown between old enemies. There was always that image of dragons and tigers not getting along, too.

I said nothing.

The air was heavy. The man had named himself, but the tension hadn't faded.

Then Fuuga, the only one who seemed unaffected by that atmosphere, looked to me. "So, am I right in assuming you there on the black thing are in

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charge of this here force?"

"I'm sorry for the late introduction," I said. "I am the provisional king of the Kingdom of Friedonia, Souma Kazuya."

Fuuga blinked. "You're a king? Do I need to address you all formally, then?"

"If you're a king, that makes us equals," I said. "Why not do as you please?"

"Ha ha! That's a relief. I'm not so good with formal stuff. You can speak normally, too. No need to address me with a title."

"...Okay, Fuuga."

The way he didn't care about our positions, and we could talk frankly, was similar to Kuu. However, in Kuu's case, that rudeness was made up for with his personal charm, while with this man, even if he had no charm, he had the power to make it seem natural that he should behave like this. He had what I might call a natural charisma that let him convince not just himself of that, but those he spoke with as well.

I realized Fuuga was staring intently at my face.

"...Is there something on my face?" I asked uncomfortably.

"Hm? Oh, no. I was just thinking, you look mild-mannered, but there's more to you than that. I don't know, but it's like I don't have a full grasp of you as a person."

A full picture of me? I didn't really get it, but I didn't think I was all that impressive. At the very least, I wouldn't have wanted to stand in front of the big man here on my own.

Fuuga stroked his chin and crossed his arms in thought. "I've never in my life thought someone was scary, but for some reason, my intuition is telling me I shouldn't mess with you. I feel like you'll drag me down into the mud if I do it carelessly."

"You're overrating me," I said. "It may be weird to say it myself, but I'm weak."

"You're still the king of a great country to the south, aren't you?"

"I'm just getting by because my companions help support me."

"Those companions of yours, they gathered around the guy who's calling himself weak, right? I feel like you come out of a different framework than me."

Fuuga and I kept talking like that.

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It should have been a conversation of no significance, but I felt a cold chill in my spine the whole time. It felt like we were each gauging the other's striking distance.

Fuuga was trying to figure out if I was worth being wary of. Meanwhile, I was doing my best not to put him on guard. Had I ever felt this much pressure in diplomacy with another country before?

"Sou... Sire," Hal called out, killing that mood. "Ruby and Naden are still fine, but the wyverns are close to their limit."

It seemed the wyverns were getting exhausted. They had been flapping their wings to hold position all this time, after all. We'd been talking too long.

"Fuuga," I said. "50,000 troops from the Kingdom of Friedonia are coming to support you. I want to discuss matters with Duke Chima, so could I ask you to escort us to him?"

He gave a jolly laugh. "Sure! If we're getting that much support, we can eliminate the monsters in no time. Durga and I will lead the way, so follow me."

Was Durga the white tiger's name, perhaps?

Fuuga and Durga turned around, then took off through the sky, leading the way for us. We followed after them.

Maybe out of caution for Fuuga, Aisha did not return to the gondola, remaining on Naden's back with me holding her around the waist.

I whispered to Aisha, "Just how strong is that guy?"

"Stronger than I am, most likely. To think there was a man like him in the Union of Eastern Nations..."

I almost doubted my ears. This was Aisha, who had amazed Hal, Kaede, and Carla when I was taken to the Star Dragon Mountain Range. This was Aisha, saying someone was stronger than her. It was a surprise to me that anyone like that existed.

While I was speechless, Aisha let out a sudden sigh. "If I'd had to fight that man now, we would have been in trouble. If it were just him, Sir Halbert and I might have managed to hold our own together, but the way he worked in concert with that tiger would have made things difficult. Sir Halbert has Madam Ruby, but without a contract between us, Naden and I couldn't coordinate that well..."

"That tiger, too. I have a really bad feeling about it..." Naden added

telepathically.

Hearing them both openly voice caution, I slapped my cheeks and refocused myself.

Then I engraved his name in my memory.

Fuuga Haan.

It seemed he was a man who warranted caution.

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Chapter 2: The Fuuga That Halbert Saw

With Fuuga and his flying white tiger leading the way, we headed for Wedan.

Once we lowered our altitude, we knew we would be sporadically attacked by flying monsters. However, we had Naden, Ruby, and the wyvern cavalry on our side. The moment the monsters appeared, they'd be struck by lightning, scorched with flames, or torn to ribbons.

Aisha stayed with me instead of returning to the gondola, so with her reassuring presence nearby, I managed to maintain my calm.

With my arms around Aisha's waist, I watched Fuuga.

There were monsters coming toward Fuuga, too, but he acted as if they didn't matter, not even readying his weapon. Every monster that came was batted to death with one swing of Durga's forepaws, so he had no need to fight any of them himself.

This had to be at least in part because he trusted Durga implicitly, but it was still fair to say he had incredible guts to be able to relax on this battlefield.

"Um, sire," Aisha put in. "Aren't you holding me a bit tight?"

It seemed I'd tightened my arms around Aisha's waist. "Oh, sorry." I relaxed them a bit.

Hal and Ruby came up alongside us to talk.

"Souma, your face is looking kind of scary, you know?" Hal said.

Hearing that, I realized for the first time how tense I probably looked.

In order to get myself into a new frame of mind, I slapped my cheeks. "...Sorry. When I watch Fuuga, I can't help but feel uneasy."

"Is there something that bothers you?" Hal asked.

"I'm not sure about that myself..."

Was it unease? Fear? Tension? When I looked at that man's back, a feeling I couldn't describe welled up inside me. It was different from the pure fear I'd felt when attacked by Gaius VIII; it felt more like something I didn't know was slowly creeping up on me. It was a strange sensation.

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Catching a look at my face, Hal spun around the arm he held his short spear with. “You probably don’t have to be that worried. Sure, he’s the king of Malmkhitan, but that’s just one country in the Union of Eastern Nations. Sure, he’s strong, so I can understand why you’re on guard. Still, if he picks a fight with the kingdom, he’s not going to be winning it single-handedly.”

“Hal...”

“You have me, Ruby, Kaede, Young Miss Aisha, Young Miss Naden, and fifty thousand soldiers with you. So you can just sit there and act confident.” Hal thumped his chest as if to say, *Leave it to me.*

Maybe he was trying to reassure me.

It was true: no matter how powerful a warrior he might be, I didn’t think there was any way Fuuga could take us on as an individual. The man might be able to wreak havoc alone, but the kingdom had more than a hundred times his thousand soldiers. If he was just strong, there were any number of ways to handle him.

But... I had a feeling there was more to him than just that. If I looked down upon him as the king of a petty state, I felt like that was going to come back and bite me hard.

Aisha and Naden chimed in.

“I will risk my life to protect you, sire,” Aisha declared.

“Well, I’m pretty sure I’m tougher than that tiger, anyway,” Naden added.

...Fair enough. I was uneasy, but when everyone said to leave it to them, that lightened my spirits just a little.

“Thanks, Aisha, Naden. You, too, Hal. Sorry to worry you.”

“I’m telling you, just leave it to us,” Hal said proudly. “Though, I’ll admit, this is kinda unexpected.”

“Unexpected?”

“Yeah. You’re fond of guys with crazy talents like his, right? Usually, I’d expect you to want to recruit him.” He looked a bit mystified.

I shook my head with a wry smile. “What I’m looking for is capable people who are willing to move forward, matching their pace with mine. There are limits to what I can do alone, after all. I want to support a large number of highly capable people. But... that’s not a man who would work under someone else, or match his pace with anyone else, is he?”

I didn’t have the strongest intuition. I couldn’t look at someone and tell how strong they were the way that Aisha and some of the others could. Still,

the moment I'd seen Fuuga's face, I'd sensed it.

That guy's BAD NEWS.

It wasn't an emotion or my experience; it was something like an instinct that was setting off warning bells.

"We can't afford to make assumptions with that man," I went on. "If I started to think he was following me, I might find myself subservient to him before I knew it. If I try to use him, I'll be used myself, and if I try to walk beside him, I'll find myself being dragged along. That's the sense I get. I can't word it well, but we're probably not very compatible."

"Not compatible, huh..."

It seemed like Fuuga had sensed something similar, too. When he'd looked at me, he'd said I might drag him down into the mud, and that he felt like I came out of a different framework than him.

Unlike me, he'd shown no signs of this bothering him, which said a lot about Fuuga's natural strength.

Even if we were feeling the same thing, I was weak, so I felt a strong sense of alarm, while Fuuga was strong, so it wasn't leaving a lasting impression on him.

At that very moment, Fuuga, who was leading the way, turned back, making a U-turn to come back to us. We stopped where we were for a moment, and Fuuga pointed downward.

"Souma," he said. "I've been watching the state of the battle, and it looks like the defenders are about to break on the west side. I'm going to support them a bit, so do you mind if I only lead you this far?"

"Got it. Wedan Castle's just a stone's throw from here. If you'd like, should we send some of our people, too?"

Fuuga shouldered his crescent blade and let out a hearty laugh. "That'd help. We should be able to wrap this up quick."

"Halbert," I ordered. "Take half the wyvern cavalry and support Sir Fuuga."

"Roger!"

"I'll be going on ahead," Fuuga announced.

No sooner had he said that than he slapped Durga on the back, beginning his rapid descent to the battlefield below.

"Us, too, then..." Halbert began.

"Wait, Hal," I interrupted.

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Seeing him about to follow Fuuga, I felt uncertainty all over.

I beckoned Hal to come closer, having Naden use her tail to pull their bodies close together.

With the distance closed, I told a dubious-looking Hal, “Hal, if you feel yourself being dragged along by Fuuga, remember Kaede and Ruby’s faces.”

“Huh? Was that really worth calling me over to say?”

Hal had a doubtful look on his face, but I nodded.

“It’s important. I feel like you and Fuuga are similar. When people are close to those who are similar to them, they notice it, and they’re either attracted or repelled. They can get dragged along, in other words.”

“Huh? Not sure I get it, but... you’re serious here, right?”

I put on a serious face to make sure he knew I meant it.

“...Okay,” Hal said. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Right. Ruby, you look after Hal, too.”

“Roger that.”

“Hey, that’s my line!” Naden cried indignantly.

With a laugh at Naden’s indignation, Hal and Ruby led about fifty wyvern cavalry to follow Fuuga.

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“Looks like... they’re fighting hard down there,” Halbert commented.

As Halbert and his men began their descent to the ground to follow Fuuga, the united forces of the Union of Eastern Nations were managing to hold back the diverse group of monsters somehow.

The soldiers of the Union of Eastern Nations were staying put in an encampment meant for field battles that was surrounded by fences and abatises (a line of sharp wooden stakes and the boughs of trees pointing outward), while archers and mages attacked with bows and magic.

This was probably a valid tactic against monsters which used no strategy or tactics, diving in without regard for their own losses. However, these monsters were intensely driven, and the fences had been broken down in some places.

The shield bearers kept clustering at the breaches, quickly plugging them, and then the ranged attack units would keep the monsters in check while the fence was rebuilt.

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They would resume long ranged attacks from behind the fence, and while the enemy was confused, cavalry or other high mobility troops would come out, defeat whatever had slipped through, and pull out. That was the process that had been carried out repeatedly.

The union's forces were made up from the armed forces of a variety of countries, but because they were all using the same tactics, they were managing to coordinate fairly well.

Halbert was impressed despite himself. "The union forces are doing pretty... Hm?"

A sudden commotion was coming from the battlefield.

When he looked in the direction of the voices, he could see something approaching the defenders on the west side.

"That's... a rhinosaurus?" Halbert wondered.

"Were rhinosauruses that hideous?" Ruby frowned.

There was a massive creature below, one that resembled the rhinosauruses used to carry freight in the kingdom. However, Ruby was right: this rhinosaurus looked very different from the ones in the kingdom. The horn on its upper jaw was disfigured, its body sagged as if rotten, and its flesh was exposed in places, so perhaps it ought to have been called a zombie rhinosaurus.

There were several of those zombie rhinosauruses heading for the encampment on the west side.

The commotion was the screams of soldiers terrified by it.

"That's not good," Halbert said worriedly. "I dunno if it's living or dead from the way it looks, but if it hits the encampment with a big body like that, it'll break through easily. It's even a threat to fortress walls."

"You're right," Ruby said. "We have to stop it."

Just as Halbert was about to tell his wyvern cavalry, "We're going to intercept," he saw Fuuga, who had gone on ahead, ready his crescent blade.

Fuuga kicked his stirrups into Durga the white tiger's belly, making his partner charge at the zombie rhinosaurus.

"Ah! Hey! Damn it!" Hal shouted. "We're going in, too!"

Halbert and his men hurried to follow. As for Fuuga, meanwhile...

"Ha ha ha! Here's a target worth taking down!"

Yeah, he kept Durga running onward with glee.

Just as the zombie rhinosaurus was about to hit the west side encampment

and blow their fences and abatises away, Fuuga came down from right above it.

“Those guys from the kingdom in the south are watching. Let’s give ’em a real show!”

And Fuuga’s crescent blade began sparking with electricity.

Fuuga drove Durga on, and when they landed on the back of one of the zombie rhinosauruses that was threatening the encampment, he swung the blade down at its back.

Kerbang!

There was a sound like the air being torn apart, and a thick bolt of lightning pierced the zombie rhinosaurus.

It opened a big, smoking hole maybe six meters across in the enormous rhinosaurus’s back.

It was hard to tell if the zombie rhinosaurus was living or dead to begin with, but putting a big hole in its body seemed to have killed it, and its sudden loss of life caused it to trip and slide along the ground with its inertia.

Even Fuuga’s allies were shocked and surprised by the strike.

The defenders who saw the flash of lightning the closest lost their voices at first, and when they came to their senses at last, they were mad with glee that a powerful enemy had been downed, cheering uproariously.

Halbert and his people were just as surprised.

“To think a human could fire off an electric shock on Naden’s level...” Ruby remarked.

“That’s not just lightning,” Hal said. “It’s that powerful because it has Fuuga’s martial ability behind it, too. But still, it’s an inhuman feat.”

Halbert realized his hands gripping the Twin Snake Spear were covered in sweat. He must have been awfully tense. It seemed it was his instinct more than his head that had reacted to the way Fuuga fought. He had goosebumps.

This wasn’t the first time he’d been awed by someone’s martial ability. When he’d battled Aisha who was venting after Souma left her behind, Halbert had learned how frightening she was when she let loose.

However, Aisha was Souma’s second primary queen-to-be, and an ally. She might have gone wild, but they hadn’t been seriously trying to kill each other.

Meanwhile, as the king of a foreign nation, Fuuga wasn’t guaranteed to always be on their side. Depending on the situation, Hal might someday have

to fight the man.

If it came to that, they'd be the ones Fuuga's power was turned against. When that happened, would he be able to stop the man?

While Halbert and his men looked on with tense expressions, Fuuga raised his voice.

"I am Fuuga Haan, King of Malmkhitan! I'll handle the big ones! Officers of the union, unleash your might!"

As Fuuga's loud voice echoed across the battlefield, the emboldened soldiers raised their own voices in a hearty war cry. Their fear of the zombie rhinosauruses was completely wiped away by their confidence in Fuuga's martial prowess.

Fuuga dived into the thick of the enemy in search of his next target.

"Prioritize taking out those rotten rhinosauruses!" Halbert ordered the wyvern cavalry and headed into battle himself.

The size of a zombie rhinosaurus made it difficult to intercept them with ground forces, but a concentrated attack with wyverns' flames could easily take them down. Halbert took out two of them with Ruby's flames, too.

Once all the zombie rhinosauruses were defeated, and the encampment's safety was secured, Halbert went looking for Fuuga.

"Ha ha ha!" a boisterous laugh howled.

Following the noise, Halbert found Fuuga and Durga in the thick of the horde of monsters, with Fuuga swinging his crescent blade while laughing as they ran forward as if across an empty wasteland.

On a battlefield filled with bloodlust, Fuuga was not only not tense, he seemed to be thoroughly enjoying himself. There wasn't a monster that could stop that man and beast's advance.

Then things started hopping over and gathering around Fuuga.

Boing! Boing!

They were mounted soldiers who rode goat-like creatures. They carried single-edged swords shaped like the crescent moon, and bows with a unique shape. These were the pride of Fuuga's kingdom Malmkhitan, the leaping cavalry.

When the leaping cavalry had gathered around Fuuga, they began following him into battle. With that large number gathered around him, Fuuga's ability to break through the enemy skyrocketed.

With Fuuga at the vanguard, that group raced back and forth across the

battlefield, trampling the enemy as if a twister had come through.

Fuuga was enjoying himself as much as ever, but the cavalry from Malmkhitan were fighting desperately for their lives. Even so, not one of them left the line of battle.

Halbert was watching Fuuga's forces from a distance. *It must be hard to keep up with Fuuga. But... no one stops following.*

Halbert thought he could understand the way those cavalrymen felt.

I'm sure... they must be proud.

Proud to be following Fuuga as he charged through the battlefield.

Proud to be able to fight alongside Fuuga, who showed them his overwhelming martial prowess.

The way he fought, it was like something out of a heroic legend. He jumped out in front of powerful enemies as if he were meant to do so, and then struck them down.

By fighting alongside him, his allies were probably able to savor the feeling of being a character in such a story.

Fuuga had that sort of splendor. Under such a glorious commander, they could fight to their fullest. Could there be any greater pride as a warrior?

If they can fight like that, I'm sure... they'll have no regrets, no matter when they die, Halbert reflected. *If they can fight for such a commander... they will have no regrets, even if they lose their lives. They will be able to accept their death has meaning, and smile as they go.*

That was why the soldiers following Fuuga were struggling so desperately to stay with him. They sought to burn their lives in his blazing, blazing, deep red flames.

How... How brilliant his radiance.

If only I could be like that, too...

"Stupid Hal!" Ruby shouted.

"Urgh?!"

Hal grimaced as Ruby's voice echoed loudly in his head.

He was so surprised, Halbert shuddered and nearly dropped the spears he was carrying. Before he could recover from his confusion, Ruby's voice sounded in his head again.

"Don't let him drag you along! Remember what Souma said!"

What Souma said? Come to think of it... he did say something before we left, didn't he...?

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Halbert tried to remember the words. If he recalled, they were...

"If you feel yourself being dragged along by Fuuga, remember Kaede and Ruby's faces."

Kaede and Ruby's faces?

Halbert closed his eyes, half-doubting what he was doing, and he imagined their faces in his head.

First, Kaede's face. She had been at his side since they were kids. She had always been timid, but lately his lovely fox-eared childhood friend had learned to speak her mind more clearly.

Next, Ruby's face. She had come from the Star Dragon Mountain Range to be his bride. Normally she was prickly, but she was actually a very lonely and very feminine dragon girl.

Halbert imagined how the two of them would see the way he was now. In his imagination, their expressions were a little worried.

Halbert's eyes went wide in silent shock. What had he just been thinking?

Had he wanted to fight to his limit, like Fuuga and his men?

Burning a brilliant, bright red, as his life flared out?

Had he thought that, if his life could burn like that, he'd have no regrets, even if he died?

...Even if it meant leaving Kaede and Ruby behind?

"Like hell I could!" Halbert roared to the heavens.

"Eeek?!" Ruby flinched.

Halbert used the handle of the spear in his right hand to whack himself in the forehead as hard as he could. The incredible thunk that resulted spoke to the fact he hadn't held back. His forehead bled a little.

Seeing Halbert suddenly bleeding, Ruby panicked. "What are you doing?! Are you all right?!"

"...Yeah, I'm fine," Halbert said, looking up at the heavens. Something warm rolled down his cheeks.

"Huh...? Hal, you're crying..."

"I'm fine. I'm... fine now, Ruby."

She stared at him mutely.

Halbert wiped away the blood and tears before looking forward.

Seriously... What had he been thinking? He'd been entranced by Fuuga's prowess, starting to convince himself his life was his own to do with as he pleased. He'd even tried to chase those he ought to protect, those who were

trying to protect him, from his head.

It was true, he envied the life Fuuga and his followers led. *But that's a life I could only live if it were me alone.*

Halbert already had two fiancées, Kaede and Ruby. They had been kind enough to love him, and eventually become his family. He had no desire to force a lifestyle that would burn their lives away on Kaede and Ruby, too.

As a warrior, he admired lives that burned hot and intense, like fireworks, but he wanted those he cared for to live happy lives, even if they were plain ones, full of smiles.

That wasn't something they could do if they were following Fuuga.

If Hal was the same man he had been before he met Souma, obsessed with his own glory, he might have been dragged in. But he was different now.

I have something more important than making a name for myself now!

Halbert recommitted himself, swearing that he would never make the same mistake again. Then, turning his short spear toward the battle, he said, "We're going in, Ruby! Let's wrap this up, and get back to Kaede together!"

"Huh?! ...Right!"

It seemed Halbert's determination had gotten through to Ruby, as she spread her wings wide.

Then the red dragon knight descended on the battlefield.

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After parting ways with Fuuga and Hal's group, we headed up to a higher plateau than Wedan City, which had been built against a small mountain. We were on our way to Wedan Castle, the home of Duke Chima.

There was an intense back-and-forth battle unfolding on the battlefield below us.

I was a little worried that Hal, who had gone after Fuuga, might be drawn in by the other man's aura, but, well, Ruby was with him, so he'd probably be fine.

"Sire, look." Aisha pointed.

"Hm?"

When I looked in the direction she was pointing, there was a soldier waving a flag up on the castle walls.

"Let's see... He's signaling for us to land in the courtyard," Aisha told me,

catching the detail with her excellent distance vision.

Following the orders from Wedan Castle, we landed in the courtyard with the half of the wyvern cavalry we had kept as guards.

Setting down the gondola that Tomoe and the rest were riding in, Naden turned back into human form and jumped down to the ground with Aisha. At that point, a middle-aged man quickly appeared from inside the castle, walking toward us with a relaxing smile.

"Well, well, it's Sir Souma Kazuya, the King of Friedonia!"

With his arms spread wide, a man with a Kaiser-style mustache welcomed us with an exaggerated reaction.

He was average weight and height, and his graying black hair made him look to be about fifty years old.

Though he wore the smile of a kindly old man, which reminded me of Liscia's father, Sir Albert, I felt something suspicious from him, too. I was pretty sure, out of all the men in our kingdom, he most resembled Sebastian of the Silver Deer, or Lord Weist of Altomura.

Also, behind the man, there was a pretty woman with a longsword slung over her back. She looked to be about twenty, and her beautiful, long hair that was tied together at waist-level left an impression.

On top of a hakama, she wore armor that looked like the sort used in ancient Japan. Because she looked like the sort of person with more than a passing familiarity with the martial arts, I was reminded of Komatsuhime of Shinshu Ueda, or Kiso no Yoshinaka's mistress Tomoe Gozen, two similar people from the other world.

The man with the Kaiser mustache took my hand with both hands and knelt with one knee on the ground before me. The woman followed his lead in kneeling, and lowered her head. I was taken aback by the suddenness of it.

Then the man held my hand reverently over his head and said, "I have already been briefed by your subordinates. I could not be more grateful that you have come all this way to assist us."

"I am indeed Souma," I said. "And you are?"

"Pardon my late introduction. I am Mathew Chima, the ruler of the Duchy of Chima."

Oh! This guy with the Kaiser mustache was Duke Chima? He was acting so obsequious, I'd wondered, but... yeah, now that he said it, it was somewhat convincing.

The reason his kindly-old-man smile had felt suspicious must have been because his face as the head of a family that had survived through crafty politicking was showing through.

"Please stand up, Sir Mathew," I said. "As rulers of our respective nations, we are equals."

"No, no, my country is a small one, even with the Union of Eastern Nations. You, the king of the great nation of the south, are far above me."

"R-Right..."

Th-This is tough...

It was really hard to deal with someone who was being thoroughly humble, and making a point of trying to lift me up. Hearing compliments from someone when I had no idea how they really felt didn't feel comfortable at all.

That said, since he was being friendly, I couldn't mistreat him. Was this how Gaius VIII had felt with Weist kneeling before him?

"It can't be easy to talk from that position," I said. "Stand up, please. You, too."

"Ohh, I neglected to introduce her. This is my daughter Mutsumi." As Mathew stood up, he put his hand on her back as he spoke.

Mutsumi Chima. Then this woman was the Mutsumi, the one that Madam Maria had said was the most popular of Duke Chima's children?

She was a clever-looking beauty, that was true, so I felt like I could see why so many lords wanted her for themselves.

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Mutsumi stood up and bowed to me. “I am Mutsumi Chima. Thank you so very much for sending troops to aid us. You seem to have many good subordinates, Sir Souma. That’s very reassuring.”

As she said that, Mutsumi glanced to my left and right.

The ones standing beside me were Aisha and Juna. If she was looking at them and calling them “good subordinates,” then she was likely a good enough warrior to tell how strong her opponents were just by looking. It seemed her reputation as a woman blessed with wisdom and bravery was not an exaggeration.

“Madam Mutsumi,” I said. “It’s true that they act as my bodyguards, but these two are also my fiancées. The one on the right is Aisha, the one on the left is Juna.”

“Yes, sir. I am Aisha Udgard.”

“Juna Doma. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Oh! Pardon me. I’m Mutsumi Chima.”

Mutsumi quickly apologized for treating them like common retainers before shaking their hands. Then...

“Souma.”

I turned, feeling a tug on my sleeve, and Naden was looking at me with her cheeks puffed up. Her upset eyes said, “I’m your fiancée, too, so introduce me properly!”

“Ahem... And this is Naden,” I said quickly. “She’s also my fiancée.”

“Nice to meet you,” Mutsumi said. While shaking Naden’s hand, she stared hard at Naden’s antlers. “Antlers and a scaly tail... Are you of the sea serpent race, by any chance?”

Naden puffed up her slight chest and snorted. “I am not. I’m a dragon from the Star Dragon Mountain Range.”

“A dragon?! You’ve formed a dragon knight contract with a dragon, Sir Souma?!”

“Yeah, well... we’re a bit of an unorthodox dragon and knight, though,” I told the surprised Mutsumi, smiling wryly.

The moment he learned I had formed a contract with a dragon, I felt like Sir Mathew’s smile got a little deeper. “My word! To have formed a contract with a dragon, even though you’re not from the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom! That’s a truly heroic accomplishment. I am in awe.”

“Uh, no, listen, my contract with Naden’s a very unusual one, and...”

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“Don’t be modest. Why, I envy those who will be lucky enough to marry you. I’ve been hoping my own daughters could marry a man such as you, you know.”

“Urgh...”

Whoa, buddy! Not so close.

He was being weirdly pushy now. And oddly eager to foist his daughter off onto me.

Juna subtly wrapped herself around my arm.

While I was wondering what was up, Juna whispered so just I could hear, “Be careful. I’m sure Sir Mathew wants a connection to you, sire.”

A connection... Oh, a direct line, huh?

When Mathew Chima had sent a request for aid with the current demon wave, he had made public his intention to send his six capable children out to become vassals or marriage partners in response to how hard each party worked.

While it was meant as bait to lure in reinforcements, it was also a way to get his children into the service of powerful factions, or to marry into them, in order to increase his own influence.

From Sir Mathew’s perspective, I, as the provisional king of the largest power on the east side of the continent, was the best catch he could hope for. No matter what it took, he wanted to take this opportunity to set up a direct channel of communication.

If possible, he clearly wanted me to marry his daughter and become a relative.

That was why he was trying to promote Mutsumi, who was the most popular catch with the other lords, to me.

“I don’t really like his methods, though,” I whispered back so that only Juna could hear.

Using his daughter’s betrothal as a tool. It shouldn’t have been any different from what the former king, Sir Albert, had done, but this time it felt way more unpleasant.

Sir Albert had done what he had for both my future and Liscia’s, and he’d wished for our happiness from the bottom of his heart. He hadn’t been just using her as a political tool.

Juna whispered to me again, “I understand how you feel, but without the ability to carry out negotiations like this, I’m sure it would be difficult for

him to maintain independence in an area with so many countries through just diplomacy."

"...I guess you're right," I murmured.

There might be some countries and lands where it was only possible to survive through underhandedness and duplicity. It was true I didn't like his methods, but if that was this country's secret to success, I didn't want to be judgmental.

"Still, it's a pain when he goes at it so hard," I muttered. "Juna, could you stick close to me for a while? It has to be harder for him to bring up marriage talks when my fiancée is present."

"Hee hee, there's a role with perks," she giggled. "I'm glad I stuck around."

As she said that with a mischievous laugh, Juna was so cute I couldn't help but stare adoringly.

While we were talking, there was a sudden beating of wings. Looking up, I saw a white tiger, red dragon, and countless wyverns descending to the courtyard.

Fuuga, Hal, and the rest had returned.

"Ha ha ha! Honestly, there wasn't a worthy foe in the lot of them!" Fuuga announced.

Unlike Fuuga, who was lifting up his crescent blade in joyous celebration of his triumphant return, Hal was holding Ruby's reins with an exhausted expression on his face.

Looking closer, there was a fresh wound on Hal's forehead. What had happened out on the battlefield? Did I need to ask him about it later?

Fuuga jumped off Durga the white tiger, walking toward us with broad steps. "Duke Chima, I went and took out the big ones wherever it looked like there was going to be a collapse."

"Ohh, excellent, Sir Fuuga! You work with the intensity of a fierce god!"

"This is nothing. As long as we're here, this country can't lose." With that, Fuuga winked at Mutsumi.

Mutsumi smiled, folded her hands in front of her, and bowed. "I am pleased to see you return uninjured after scattering our enemies. I am awed by your prowess. Do you know no fear, Sir Fuuga?"

"Naw, it's all so I can take you as my bride," Fuuga smirked. "I'll bet I need to work even harder."

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He was suddenly declaring he'd make her his wife?! How bold.

Mutsumi's eyes went wide for a moment when he said it, but she eventually giggled and smiled. "You're an honest man."

"If I want something, I say so. If I say it, I make my wish come true. That's my creed," Fuuga said, brimming with confidence.

If he wanted something... huh. So he was the type that lived true to his desires, and drew power from that. That made him easy to read, but I'd be scared if our interests ever clashed. Once that man resolved to do something, I doubted he'd ever back down.

Just then, I heard voices from behind us. ""Eek?!""

Turning back, I saw that Hal was hugging Kaede and Ruby, who was back in her human form. He actually picked them both up.

Kaede was flailing her arms in surprise. "W-Whoa, Hal?! What do you think you're doing all of a sudden?"

Kaede kept protesting, but Hal didn't let the two of them go.

"...Sorry," he said.

"Huh?" she asked, looking confused.

"That I came close to forgetting you two, for even a moment... I'm truly sorry," Hal said gravely.

Seeming to have picked up on something from that, Kaede gently patted Hal on the back.

Ruby was silently letting him do what he wanted, too.

I was silent. Something really must have happened out on the battlefield. But, well, as long as those two were with him, he'd be fine.

Even when you seem ready to collapse, if there's someone at your side who cares for you, you can get going again. I'd been through that a number of times myself up to this point. By feeling that warmth, you can reconfirm what it is you ought to be protecting.

I clapped my hands, trying to get myself back on track. "Sir Mathew. The reinforcements will arrive tomorrow. I'd like to discuss arrangements."

Sir Mathew nodded eagerly. "Ohh, of course! We don't have time to just flap our gums out here forever. Let us go inside the castle. Come, come, Sir Fuuga, everyone, this way!"

With that, Sir Mathew began to lead the way.

Before we reached the inside of the castle, I gave instructions to each of my companions who were present. "Aisha, Juna, Naden, Hal, Kaede, Ruby.

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The six of you will come with me. The wyvern cavalry are to stand by here until further orders. Kuu and Leporina, you can do as you like, but...”

I looked over at the master and servant pair from Turgis.

Kuu crossed his arms behind his head and laughed. “While Bro’s holding war talks, maybe we’ll take a little look around the area. Right, Leporina?”

“I’ll come with you, but don’t cause too much trouble for the people here, okay?” Leporina scolded.

“Ookyakya! I know that!”

It seemed they were planning to wander around Wedan. They’d just tagged along of their own accord, so that was probably fine.

“That leaves Tomoe and Inugami,” I said. “Inugami, I want you to contact Kagetora. It can wait until you’ve been shown to your rooms, but can I leave that to you?”

“Understood. What should be done about guarding Lady Tomoe in the meantime?”

“Oh, right... What should we do...?”

“I-I’ll be fine,” Tomoe said quickly. “Please, do your duty, Mr. Inugami.”

Inugami looked concerned, but Tomoe smiled as she said that.

Holding down the fort alone, huh? I was a bit worried, but she would probably be safe inside this castle.

“Well, can you wait in your room, then?” I asked.

“Got it,” Tomoe said, snapping her hand to her forehead in a salute. How adorable.

I cleared my throat to keep myself from fawning on her, and then turned to the rest. “Now then, you can all begin carrying out your orders.”

On my command, each of them went into action to fulfill their duties.

We started walking to follow Sir Mathew, but... at this point, we were overlooking something.

“...Hee hee!”

We were overlooking the fact that Tomoe’s tail was swishing around as she eyed the area with fascination.

Our beloved little sister was at an inquisitive age.

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Chapter 3: A Little Adventure and a Meeting

My name is Tomoe. I'm the adopted daughter of the former royal couple of Elfrieden, Lord Albert and Lady Elisha, which makes me Big Brother Souma and Big Sister Liscia's adopted little sister.

Right now, I was in a room in the castle of Sir Mathew, who ruled over the Duchy of Chima. Before leaving this room, Big Brother Souma and Mr. Inugami had given me instructions.

"All right, we'll be leaving you alone for a little while, but stay put and wait for us, okay?"

"I will return as soon as my work is complete."

Left alone in the room, I sat on the bed dangling my legs for a while, but I quickly got tired of that, so I jumped down from the bed. Then, quiiiietly approaching the door, I peeked out through the slight crack of an opening.

No one was in the hallway. It was wartime, so maybe they didn't have enough people.

I slipped out of the room, closing the door behind me.

Big Brother and everyone else told me to stay in the room and wait, but I really wanted to explore the castle.

I mean, while we were studying together, my teacher, Mr. Hakuya, had said, *"The experiences you'll have as a child are a treasure."*

I'd answered, *"I want to grow up to be a woman who can help my big brother and everyone else."*

His gentle response: *"There's no need to rush. While you're a child, with a child's heart, you should look and listen, and experience many things. The older you get, the more you lose your freedom of emotion. The things you feel with your eyes and ears now are sure to help you when you grow up and become a woman."*

After saying that, he'd patted me on the head.

That was why I wanted to see all sorts of things for myself. Not while

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being protected by Big Brother or Inugami, either; I wanted to explore this sort of unfamiliar place on my own.

It hurt breaking my promise with Big Brother like this, but I was sure if I apologized afterward, he'd forgive me.

Having come out into the corridor, I looked around the castle. Unlike the castle in Parnam, Duke Chima's castle felt unrefined. There weren't many windows, so it was a little dark, even though it was the middle of the day.

Maybe because everyone was fighting down below the castle, it felt like most of the people I passed by were maids, or other people who didn't fight.

Huh—but our head maid, Serina, and one of the other maids, Carla, could fight, couldn't they? Maybe one or two of these maids could fight, too.

My teacher always said, *"You shouldn't judge people solely by their appearance,"* after all.

Thinking over that as I kept going, I spotted a maid by the window who seemed to be on break, so I tried asking her why this castle was so unrefined.

"Little girl, I think the reason you feel this place is unrefined is that this castle exists purely for defensive purposes," the maid kindly explained. "Duke Chima usually does his official work at a building in the town at the foot of the mountain. So, when the war came, he took shelter in this castle while we waited for reinforcements. If we first meet the enemy at the town walls, and then fall back here as soon as they break through, we can keep fighting, right?"

"I see..."

It seemed to me that a castle reflected its country. Parnam Castle was built on the plains, and it was also the face of the country, so it was built to be showy. But Duke Chima's castle was made for defense, so it was unrefined.

It was interesting how you could see the faces of the people who ruled a country like this.

Oh, but recently, Parnam Castle has been...

Big Brother had turned most of his own room into a sewing room, he'd made a restaurant to serve the dishes created by him and Poncho, and he'd even installed something called an "elevator" that used weights to take you up and down floors without using the stairs. It was pretty ridiculous.

Big Sister Liscia had told him off for that, with a frowny face.

Roroa had been cackling with laughter while watching the two of them, though...

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If the shape of a country showed up in its castle, did that make the current Kingdom of Friedonia a ridiculous country?

Hmm... maybe it did.

There was the rhinosaurus preserve, the Van Shoujou Army, and even a black ryuu flying around so she could tell everyone the weather.

I *was* involved when it came to the silly things that involved animals, though.

I walked for a little bit while worrying about it, then came to a stop.

"...Huh?"

Erm... Where was this place again... exactly?

The unrefined way the castle looked meant there weren't a lot of decorations, so all the hallways seemed the same. The same color of carpet, the same sort of doors, the same sort of candelabras... It all looked so samey, and I'd been lost in thought while I was walking, so I'd lost track of where I came from.

"Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What do I do now?!"

My eyes darted around.

I remembered going up one flight of stairs... Ah, but where were those stairs now? Because the doors were evenly spaced, I couldn't find the right one again, even if I looked around the area.

I took off walking at a brisk pace. I was hoping I could ask someone for directions, but wouldn't you know it: there was no one around when I needed them.

Th-Th-This wasn't good.

Ohh... I'm going to make Big Brother and everyone else worry...

I couldn't imagine anything but their worried faces, and it made my ears droop. I just wanted to broaden my horizons so I could help them, but this was doing the opposite.

Ohh... Where am I, really...? Huh?

Reaching the end of the hallway, I realized it had gotten a little brighter.

It seemed to be a door leading outside, and the light of the setting sun was streaming in. If I went out there, someone might find me. Thinking that, I went outside.

Fwah?!

I squinted in the blowing wind.

Looking up, the sky was high above, and looking down, there were

cobblestones. It seemed these were the castle's walls.

Oh, I get it... I did go up a set of stairs, didn't I?

This might be outside, but it couldn't be ground level. It seemed that, because it wasn't very big, Duke Chima's castle was attached to the castle walls surrounding it.

When I walked along the edge of the walls, I saw something incredible.

Looking north from this castle, which was built backing onto a mountain, I could see the town of Wedan below, and outside the walls surrounding it, I could clearly see the forces of the Union of Eastern Nations fighting monsters. I remembered something Mr. Hakuya had said in history class.

"There are exceptions to this, but taking the high ground will usually give an advantage to your allies. That's because being able to carefully watch what the enemy is doing means you can prepare countermeasures. Looking at history, there are many examples where the side that took the high ground won."

I thought that was what he'd said, anyway.

By shutting himself up in this castle, observing the enemy as he fought back, and waiting for reinforcements, the Duchy of Chima had never fallen. This was a new discovery.

Then I noticed someone sitting on the edge of the wall.

"Huh?" I said, surprised.

From the look of it, it was a boy about my age.

The thin boy with chestnut brown hair kept looking up and down. When I approached to see what he was doing, it turned out he was drawing something.

There was a piece of paper spread across the board hanging from his neck, and he kept drawing something on it with charcoal, raising his head, looking through the telescope lying by his side, and then drawing something again, repeating the process over and over again. He was so absorbed in his work that he didn't even notice me approaching.

"Um, what are you doing...?"

"Uwah?!" The boy was so startled that he jumped up.

He shoved on the glasses he'd left beside the telescope, and stared hard at me.

"Who are you?"

"Oh! Sorry to surprise you. My name is Tomoe."

“I’m... Ichiha.”

Ichiha? He looked about my height, maybe a little shorter. He had a gentle face and thin arms and legs, so I thought he looked a bit like a girl. Maybe it was the glasses, but he looked like he was good at studying.

“Are you from this country, Ichiha?” I asked.

“Uh, yes... Um, how old are you, Tomoe?”

“Me? I’m eleven this year.”

“I’m ten. So you don’t need to be so polite to me...”

Huh. He was a year younger than me. It would feel awkward having an older girl be super formal with him.

“Okay, I’ll talk normally, then,” I said. “You can talk to me however you want, too, Ichiha.”

“Okay... Tomoe.”

“So, what were you doing here, Ichiha? It looked like you were drawing something...”

“Ah!”

When I tried to peak at his drawing board, Ichiha rushed to hide it.

“Ah!” Maybe I was being a bit too rude. “I’m sorry. You’re embarrassed to have people look at your work, right?”

“Ah...! Um... I don’t want to show you it, or maybe I should say it’s better if you don’t see it...”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

If he was going to make a big deal of it like that, I just wanted to see it more.

I stared Ichiha in the eye, making him aware of that fact. “I want to see it.” I wagged my tail, showing off how interested I was.

While I kept staring at him that way, Ichiha folded, and reluctantly held his drawing board out to me. “Let me just say... It’s nothing fun to look at, okay?”

“Eheheh.” I took the drawing board and looked at the paper on it. “Huh? This is...”

Seeing what was drawn there, I cocked my head to the side.

It was drawn far better than I’d have expected from a ten-year-old, but what really caught me was the model. There was a mysterious creature drawn there.

With quick strokes of charcoal, he’d drawn a realistic image of a two-

headed dog with bat-like wings.

Come to think of it, Ichiha had been looking through a telescope as he drew this. What that telescope had been pointed toward was... the battlefield.

“Is this a drawing of a monster?” I asked.

“...Yeah.”

There were several layers of drawings on the board, and flipping through them, I found there were drawings of a bunch of different monsters. Each of them was well done, and captured what made the creature unique, but... what was it?

I hadn’t felt anything in particular just looking at one of them, but with several of his drawings in front of me, it felt like there was a sort of special focus here. It wasn’t like he’d just drawn them as a hobby.

“Wait, Ichiha... Do you only draw monsters?” I asked.

“Yeah.” Ichiha’s voice sounded very dry. His eyes quivered with—how shall I put this?—a sort of lonely sadness in them.

While I was still unable to find a way to talk to him, Ichiha let out a self-mocking laugh.

“It’s creepy, isn’t it? That I’m here just drawing pictures of monsters.”

“Um, that’s not really...”

“No need to force yourself. I know well enough what an oddball I am. Father and my brothers and sisters don’t have to tell me, either.”

I swallowed.

When he said that, his loneliness apparent, I was reminded of myself in the past.

Before being discovered by Big Brother Souma, I’d thought I was worthless. As refugees, we had lost our home, and I’d spent every day thinking, *I must be such a heavy burden on Mother.*

That’s why I...

Slap!

I grabbed Ichiha by both cheeks, and stared right into his surprised eyes.

“Bweh! What are you doing?!” he shouted.

“I think they’re good drawings. I don’t really know much about drawing, but I think you’ve captured the monsters so well that even I can understand what makes them special.”

“Y-You don’t need to lie to make me feel better...” Ichiha’s words were slurred by me pressing on his cheeks.

“I’m not just complimenting you! You have a reason why you draw nothing but monsters, don’t you? I’m sure my big brother would be interested in you!”

Ichiha’s eyes... They felt similar to Big Brother Souma’s, or Mr. Hakuya’s. They were the eyes of someone with their vision focused on something different from everyone else.

It made me want to introduce him to my big brother and teacher even more. Because I felt like they could find the value in this boy that I couldn’t.

I removed my hands from Ichiha’s cheeks, and pulled him by the arm.

“W-Wait, why are you pulling?!” he shouted.

“Ichiha, I want you to meet my big brother. I want you to show him those drawings. If you do... I feel like something is going to change.”

“What do you mean, ‘something’?”

“Something!”

I walked off while pulling Ichiha by the hand... and then quickly came to a halt.

“Wh-What’s wrong?” Ichiha dubiously asked me when I suddenly stopped.

“...Now that I think of it, I was lost,” I admitted. “I was told to stay in our room while Big Brother was talking to Duke Chima, but...”

“Hahhh...” Ichiha sighed and scratched his head.

Oh! That gesture! That felt a little like Big Brother, too.

Ichiha stepped out in front of me, and this time he led me by the hand. “If you’re one of Father’s guests, it should be the reception room, I guess. I’ll show you the way.”

“Really?! Thanks, Ichiha!”

When I hugged him to show my thanks, Ichiha turned a bright shade of red.

“Wait, huh?” I added. “Did you just say ‘Father’...?”

“I’m Ichiha Chima.”

While I stared at him blankly, Ichiha explained with clear self-contempt, “I’m the oddball... who’s the youngest of the eight Chima siblings.”

Ichiha was taking me back to where Big Brother and the others were, through one hallway after another, when suddenly he came to a stop.

“Ah!”

“Ichiha?”

I looked ahead of us, wondering what was up, and I saw three large men coming our way. They were all so muscular that you could see it through their clothes, so it was clear they had to be soldiers.

What concerned me was that they all looked injured.

One had a head wound, with bandages wrapped around his forehead, while another seemed to have a broken arm, as it was wrapped up and hanging from his neck. The last of them may have had a broken leg, as he was walking on crutches.

The soldiers noticed us, too.

“Huh? What’re some brats doing in a place like this?” the one with the forehead injury said, sounding like he was in a bad mood.

Then, looking down at us from above, he started staring.

“U-Um...” I said nervously.

There was a scary man looking down at us, and he seemed to be in a bad mood, so my legs started to tremble.

These days, I only had nice people like Big Brother Souma, Mr. Hakuya, and all the others around me. Even before that, at the refugee camp, the refugees had all worked together to survive.

That was why this was the first time I’d ever had someone glare at me with such open hatred before. It was really scary. I wanted to run away, but my legs wouldn’t move.

While I was unable to say anything out of fear, the man on crutches started eyeing me. “Is she a beastman from the north? She’s dressed nice, but... I’ll bet she’s one of them refugees.”

“Tch! What an eyesore. Some refugee brat shouldn’t be wandering around the castle.” The man with his arm in a sling spat those words at me with a cold glare. “We were out there fighting, and we got hurt this bad, while some refugee gets to sit comfy back in the castle? It ain’t right!”

“Hey, hey, no need to get worked up at some kid...” said the other soldier.

“Shut up! We oughta throw her off the castle gate and use her as bait for the monsters.” With that, the man with his arm in a sling reached for me with his good arm.

“N-No...!” I squealed.

“Hold on!” In order to defend me as I covered my ears in terror, Ichiha stepped forward. “This girl is a guest of Father’s! Stop disrespecting our

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guest! Besides, it's not her fault that you got hurt, is it?!"

"What was that, you brat?!"

With the men intimidating him, Ichiha's arms and legs seemed to be trembling, but he still desperately hung in there and stared them down. "I'll bet you got hurt trying to show off to my sister, right? And now, since you can't distinguish yourselves anymore because of your injuries, you're taking out your frustrations over losing the competition for her on this kid!"

"You little...! Watch your mouth!" The soldier with his arm in a sling grabbed Ichiha by the collar with his good hand.

Because he was only ten, and small on top of that, that was enough to lift Ichiha into the air. Ichiha groaned in pain.

I came back to my senses and shouted, "S-Stop it!"

"Hey, that's got to be overdoing it," one of the other soldiers objected.

"Think what'll happen if we cause a commotion here," the third one agreed. "It'll hurt our position in the United Forces."

"...Tch."

With the other two telling him off, the man with his arm in a sling grudgingly let go of Ichiha.

Set free, and with his hands on the ground, Ichiha coughed loudly.

I immediately ran to his side. "Are you okay?! I'm sorry you went through that for me..."

Coughing, Ichiha said, "I-It's not your fault, Tomoe. I stuck my neck out on my own." Ichiha smiled at me, though it was a bit weakly. "Besides, if I abandoned you here, my sister would get mad. She just barely told me to get involved with other people, after all."

"Ichiha..."

"Wait, this kid, he's the youngest brother of the House of Chima, isn't he?" the man on crutches said in alarm, looking at Ichiha.

When he heard that, the man with his arm in a sling let out a snorting laugh. "What, the inferior youngest brother? They say all his brothers and sisters are talented, but this runt's got no gift whatsoever, right?"

"Yeah, I hear that's why he's not part of the reward this time," the man with bandages around his forehead said, nodding.

As the three men laughed mockingly at him, Ichiha hung his head and clenched his fists as he stood there and took it. He must have been frustrated at the humiliation, but he was doing everything he could to suppress his

anger.

He probably thought I'd be in danger if things got any more out of hand.

Maybe he was thinking that if it was just him being mocked, that was fine. So long as they didn't turn their scorn on me.

"Ha ha ha! It must be hard on Duke Chima, having a worthless son," one of the soldiers mocked.

"He's got a girlish face, too. It's too bad... I bet there'd have at least been someone willing to take him if he were a real woman."

"Guh..." Gritting his teeth, Ichiha endured the verbal abuse.

That's enough! You don't have to put yourself through this for me! I thought, and I was about to step forward, when... it happened.

"...Do you have some business with my little sister?"

It was a quiet voice, but clearly filled with anger, and when I looked up, Big Brother Souma, Aisha, and Mutsumi Chima, the woman we had met in the courtyard, were on the other side of the three soldiers.

Aisha and Mutsumi both had angry faces, and while Big Brother Souma was pretending to be calm, his eyes were not smiling.

The three men turned toward the newcomers, and tried to complain.

"Whaaat? Are you this refugee's—bwuh—!"

Before the man with his arm in a sling could get the rest of his words out, Aisha closed in and seized his face in her right hand. I thought I heard an unpleasant squishing sound.

"...Sire," Aisha said coolly. "May I?"

"You have my permission."

It was a short, but disquieting exchange.

Then Aisha, incredibly, proceeded to lift the man up with one hand.

The strength to lift up a grown man was incredible on its own, but that she had the grip to not let go of his face while doing so was astounding.

The man with that grip applied to his face had to be in an unimaginable amount of pain.

He flailed his arms, struggling.

Aisha looked at the man and asked, "How does it feel to be lifted up? You don't like it? Did your parents never teach you not to do things to others you wouldn't want done to yourself?"

Ah! But... when the man had lifted Ichiha up, he'd done it by the front of his shirt, not by putting an iron claw on his face...

The remaining two men got angry.

“What?! Who is this dark elf?!”

“Why, you...! Let him go!”

They reached for the hilts of the swords at their waist, trying to draw their weapons.

When they did, Aisha charged them, using the man she had lifted up as a human shield. Seeing the first man groan seemed to make the other two falter, unable to draw their swords.

“Both of you, stop this!” Mutsumi commanded.

With that, the men came to their senses and removed their hands from their hilts.

Oh! That was right. Come to think of it, Ichiha had been saying these men had dropped out of the competition over Mutsumi. In other words, it would be bad for them if Mutsumi came to hate them. They must have been riled up and not noticed Mutsumi’s presence before now.

“Aisha, you too... I think you’ve done enough,” Big Brother Souma said, looking at the two men who were now settled down.

“Yes, sir!” Aisha said promptly.

“Whoa... Ow!”

Suddenly having been released by Aisha, the man with his arm in a sling landed flat on his behind.

While the other two shrank away in front of Mutsumi, the man with his arm in a sling must have still been mad about getting humiliated, because he glared at Big Brother Souma with his anger not going down. “Why, you...! Who do you think you are, butting in like this?!”

“Who do I think I am...? A king, maybe?” Big Brother Souma said as if it were nothing.

He’d only said the truth, but the man apparently thought it was a joke, because his face warped with even more anger.

“You think you can mess with me. I’m gonna kill—”

“Stop it! Do you have any idea who it is you’re picking a fight with?!” Mutsumi said, standing in front of Big Brother. “Who do you think this man is?! This is Sir Souma Kazuya, the king of the great nation of the south, the United Kingdom of Elfrieden and Amidonia, you know?!”

The three men were suddenly in a panic.

“Wha?! Then this man... no, this gentleman... is the King of Friedonia?!”

one of them shouted.

Judging by their attitude, these men might have had significant status inside the Union of Eastern Nations. They could have been rulers of their own countries, or entrusted with command of entire armies. But there was an overwhelming difference in power between a country in the Union of Eastern Nations and the Kingdom of Friedonia.

Big Brother was someone these people could not afford to get angry, and now that they realized they had been picking a fight with him, they didn't know what to do.

As for Big Brother...

"I don't think I've gotten to do this sort of *Mito Koumon* stuff in a while..."

...he whispered to himself with a wry smile.

What's a Mito Koumon? I wondered.

Whatever it was, the men were thoroughly deflated as Mutsumi yelled at them.

"Madam Tomoe who you see there is Sir Souma's little sister! If you have been rude to Madam Tomoe, do you mean to confront the Kingdom of Friedonia?! If you intend to cause a diplomatic incident with the great nation of the south, the other countries of the union won't keep quiet about it!"

""""N-No, ma'am! We're truly sorry!"""" The men got down on the ground.

Then they bowed their heads repeatedly, not just to Big Brother Souma, but to Ichiha, too.

They clearly thought a diplomatic incident might put their positions at risk. They were desperately begging for forgiveness.

If no one did anything, the way they were going at it, they looked like they might start rubbing their faces on his boots soon enough.

That was apparently a bit much even for Big Brother.

He sighed. "That's enough. Be off with you."

The three men left, bobbing their heads desperately as they went.

"Honestly, what a bunch of troublemakers," Mutsumi said indignantly. "Ichiha, are you okay?"

"Y-Yes, Sister!"

Walking over to Ichiha, Mutsumi put a hand on his head. "It was good that you protected a girl. But it's not good to be too reckless, okay?"

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"...Yes. I'm sorry."

"I'm not angry. I'm happy you showed your manliness." With a soft smile, Mutsumi patted Ichiha on the head. "Now then, Sir Souma, it seems we have found your little sister, so I will be on my way now. In regards to those three, I will have my father issue a formal complaint to the countries they belong to."

"Oh! Sure. Thank you."

Mutsumi bowed to us before leaving.

While I was feeling relieved to have been saved, suddenly a shadow fell over me.

Hesitantly, I looked with upturned eyes, and there was Big Brother with a serious look on his face that I could read no emotion from. Next to him was Aisha, who looked like she wanted to help me, but was holding it back.

Big Brother crouched down, looking me straight in the eye. "...Tomoe."

"Y-Yes?"

"You know what I want to say, right?"

"Yes... I'm sorry for running off alone and making you worry about me."

When I quietly bowed my head, Souma let out a little sigh.

"We're the ones who forced you into the position of being our little sister. So I won't tell you to 'comport yourself in a way that befits your position,' or anything stuffy like that."

He wasn't shouting at me, just speaking calmly. In some ways, that stung worse.

"But as your big brother figure, I'm beside myself with worry whenever I think something bad might happen to you. Aisha's the same. The reason she got so mad was because it looked like they were frightening you. Well, I guess the reason I didn't stop her was because I was pissed, too..."

"Everyone was worried, you know? I'm sure Sir Inugami is still running around looking for you." Aisha's voice was full of concern, which only made me feel worse.

I wanted to become someone who could help Big Brother and everyone else, but I had ended up causing them trouble instead. This was no good at all.

And yet, even after what I'd done, Big Brother told me, "If anything were to happen to you, it's not just us: Big Sister Liscia, your mother Tomoko, your little brother Rou, and your adoptive parents Sir Albert and Lady Elisha

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would all be sad."

"Yeah..."

"From now on, when you want to do something, bring someone along to protect you, in order to secure your own safety. You can use Inugami for whatever you want, so, please—you're a child. Rely on others to help you." Big Brother looked straight at me.

I bowed my head again, swallowing. "Okay... I'm sorry."

"Watch yourself from now on..." he went on. "Phew. Well, from the look of those drooping ears and tail, I'd say you're actually reflecting on what you did, so that's enough lecturing."

Big Brother stood up, placing a hand on my head.

"Well, when we first met, you were so shy and hesitant about everything. So, as your big brother, seeing you so active does make me happy."

"Big Brother..." I murmured.

"Is it Big Sister Liscia's influence? If so, well, I can understand why you'd want to be a little mischievous, but... everything in moderation. Those times when you just have to do it, rely on someone. Okay?"

"Okay!" I said energetically.

Big Brother patted me on the head.

Then he walked over to Ichiha, who had been silently watching how things were unfolding, and knelt down so they were at the same eye-level.

"I'm sorry," Souma said. "It seems my little sister troubled you. Thank you for protecting her."

"Oh, no... I was too weak to do anything..."

"But you stood up for her, right? I know how scary it is to stand in front of men with scary faces when you're weak and unable to do anything. I'm impressed you could do it at your age."

Having said that, Big Brother stood up and extended a hand to Ichiha.

"I'm Tomoe's big brother, Souma Kazuya. Nice to meet you."

"Ah...! I'm Ichiha Chima."

Ichiha timidly took his hand, and they shook hands.

Big Brother, who was so good at finding people that he was called a recruitment maniac, was shaking hands with Ichiha, who seemed to have something unique about him that nobody praised him for.

Seeing the two of them shake hands, I felt like something was about to begin to move, and I felt my heart race just a little.

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The boy was thin, wore glasses, and looked a little on the weak side, but he had the same attractive features as Madam Mutsumi, so he was going to be the kind of beautiful and literate young man that girls would go gaga for.

He was wearing the sort of sleeveless outfit that was typical of this country, but I felt like the lined kimono and hakama of a Meiji Era writer would have suited him. We were from a different country, so I couldn't make those for him, though.

Maybe because the basic concept of the clothes they wore was the same, when he stood next to Tomoe, they looked like a pair of dolls.

Aisha smiled and said, "They both look so cute."

"Um, is something the matter?" the boy in question hesitantly asked.

It seemed I'd been staring.

"Ohh, sorry," I said. "I was lost in thought. Er, Sir Ichiha... Wait, it sounds weird calling someone Tomoe's age that. Can I just call you Ichiha, like she does?"

"Uh, okay. Whatever you like."

"Okay, Ichiha. Outside of official venues, you don't need to call me Sir or Lord, either. You can refer to me the same way you would refer to Aisha."

"O-Okay... Souma," he said hesitantly.

I shook Ichiha's hand again.

Ichiha seemed gobsmacked by everything that had just happened. He looked over at Tomoe, blinking. "You were a princess from Friedonia. Um... I'm sorry. I may have been being rude to you."

"Princess?! No, no, not at all. I'm no one special, so it would be nice if you could just act the same way as you have been. That's what I want, actually."

"S-Sure. Okay..."

The two children were fumbling awkwardly. Aisha and I watched the two of them with fond smiles.

"The way they interact is kind of cute," I said.

"It is, indeed," she agreed. "It puts me in a bittersweet sort of mood."

I placed a hand on Tomoe's head. "So, Princess Tomoe?"

"Ah! Not you, too, Big Brother!"

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“Did your rambunctious little adventure bear any fruit? Did you find anything interesting?”

“Ah! That’s right, Big Brother!” Tomoe shouted as if she’d remembered something. Then, circling around behind Ichiha, she pushed him toward me.

“W-Wait, Tomoe?!” he yelped.

Ichiha dug in his heels to fight being pushed forward, but maybe because Tomoe was a little older, or perhaps because girls were slightly stronger at their age, he was unable to resist as he inched closer and closer to me.

What in the world were these kids doing? Was this some unorthodox form of wrestling?

As I looked at them with my head cocked to the side, Tomoe took on an incredibly serious expression.

“Big Brother, would you look at Ichiha’s pictures?”

“T-Tomoe!” the boy cried.

“Pictures?” I asked.

Now that she mentioned it, Ichiha had a drawing board hanging from his neck, and there were a number of pieces of paper attached to it.

I used paper all the time back at the castle, but in this world, the stuff was pretty expensive. The technology for making it was established, and it wasn’t out of reach for the common people, but it was expensive enough they wouldn’t waste it blowing their noses. If he was being given paper to draw with freely, that really showed he was the son of the head of a country, even if it was a small one.

In order to avoid intimidating Ichiha, I crouched down and matched my eye level to his. “So, uh... Those pictures, can I see them?”

Ichiha may have been embarrassed, because he bobbed his head up and down, his face turned downward. He handed me the drawing board, and Aisha and I took a look at once.

“Is this... a picture of a monster?” I queried.

“Ohh, it’s quite well drawn, isn’t it?”

The drawing was a charcoal sketch of a monster. It was a bat-winged cerberus... no, there were only two heads, so an orthrus. It was drawn in a highly realistic manner. It seemed to capture the different parts of the creature’s body well. It was hard to believe this was the work of a child around the age of ten.

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Still, it was only good “for the work of a child.”

I didn’t have much... or any... education in art, but I could tell that while this drawing wasn’t a piece of art, it still was well done.

Despite being drawn in a realistic style, there was no sense of movement, like I was looking at a picture from an encyclopedia. If this was all he was capable of, there were plenty of people in our own country with this level of talent... Wait, what kind of eye was I looking at a child’s drawing with?

It was probably because of my perpetual search for human resources, but I’d developed a tendency to look for any unique gifts people had when first meeting them. That habit was rude to the other party, though, so I really needed to fix it.

Thinking that as I flipped through the pages...

“Huh?”

That was when I noticed something.

There was another picture of a monster under that first picture of a monster; several of them, in fact. But the pictures underneath had a number of square frames drawn into them.

Taking a closer look, it seemed the parts of the monsters’ bodies were surrounded with frames.

Going back to the bat-winged orthrus, there was another picture beneath that was likely a drawing of another individual.

In that picture, there was one frame around the wings, one around the body, and one around each of the two dog heads.

In the picture beneath it, of an ogre with a festering body (a zombie ogre), one frame was around its whole body, with diagonal lines running through it.

The two-headed ogre beneath that had a frame around its whole body, and then one around one of its heads.

Could it be...?

The speed with which I flipped through the pages increased. I went back and forth, comparing drawings. Looking at the drawing of the orthrus with frames from before, on closer inspection, the body was not that of a dog. It had hooves on its feet, so it might have been closer to a serow. The body of the orthrus above was canine, like you’d expect, so that made it clear it was a different individual.

These frames... No doubt about it. There are rules behind them.

I was staring so intently at the drawings, Aisha got worried. “Um, sire? Is

something the matter?"

"Ohh, sorry. I was focusing on the pictures."

"Did something about them catch your attention?"

"Yeah. Hey, Ichiha. Do you have any more drawings of monsters like these?"

Ichiha blinked in surprise and tilted his head to the side. "I have lots in my room. Do you want to come see?"

And so, in the room Ichiha led us to, my eyes went wide with surprise again.

"Whoa..."

The walls were mostly plastered with drawings of monsters.

Intimidated by the sight, Tomoe hugged my leg tight. Fair enough; depending on how you looked at this, it could be an unsettling sight. But for me, right now, I was intrigued by the drawings.

In each of the drawings on the walls, square frames had been drawn in, just like on the ones I had looked at before. In addition, the ones on the walls had been sorted by body part type.

One section focused on monsters with bat-like wings, while another focused just on monsters that were festering like zombies.

Looking at this scene, I became confident. "Ichiha, you weren't just drawing monsters, you were categorizing them by their body parts and status, weren't you?"

Ichiha nodded. "Right. This country is close to the Demon Lord's Domain, so a lot of monsters show up. Watching them from up on the walls, I noticed some had similar body parts. That made me think I could sort them by parts, so I drew them."

I knew it. Those square frames were separating the monsters into parts.

If there was a bat-winged orthrus, it could be separated into four parts. The frames with diagonal lines indicated an individual with festering flesh. The frame inside a frame on the two-headed ogre indicated an unnecessary part stuck onto another individual.

Ichiha had divided the monsters by their unique traits, creating a categorization system from that.

"Tomoe, it was wrong of you to sneak off without saying anything, but... finding Ichiha may have been a major accomplishment," I said.

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“Big Brother?”

I placed a hand on Tomoe’s head. “This picture here is a treasure of mankind.”

“N-No way, you’re exaggerating.” Ichiha was flustered and shook his head, but I fully believed that these categorized pictures had that much value.

By the standards of this world and its people, monsters were aberrant beings. No matter how a monster looked, it was “befitting a monster,” so no one thought deeply about their aberrance. Even I hadn’t. This was a world of magic, so I had complacently accepted that it wasn’t all that weird for there to be monsters.

However, seeing the drawings of monsters hung up in this room had changed my thinking. Even the monsters that looked like random aberrations were, in fact, following a system of rules.

If I studied the pictures in this room, I might be able to learn what monster parts came with which abilities. If we knew the abilities each part had, we might be able to identify which monsters could and couldn’t fly, as well as roughly how agile they were, just by seeing the shape of them.

It wouldn’t just be useful in combat, either.

What we had learned in the Kingdom of Lastania, that monster meat was edible, could be defined more specifically. For instance, if we knew which parts were edible, and which parts were dangerous or toxic, we could make decisions about which monsters could or couldn’t be eaten. That would expand the range of edible monsters beyond the flying tsuchinoko.

Monster parts had uses beyond just eating them, too. Genia the overscientist’s inventions often used monster parts.

Monster parts came in complicated and weird shapes, so up until now, we had only had whatever happened to come into our possession, which tended to make those items valuable because of their rarity. However, if we knew the applications of each part, the rate at which those parts would be collected after defeating a monster would go up.

If adventurers like Juno and her party raised the rate at which they collected parts they would previously have left in the dead bodies of monsters killed in a dungeon, the supply to the market would rise, and the price would fall.

It would be good to spread this knowledge to the adventurers’ guild and the merchants’ guild. Up until now, they had only collected parts whose

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value was obvious, but if there were prices on everything, that would help fill the adventurers' wallets, too. That would in turn enable them make the decision to avoid hitting rare parts with their attacks.

Basically, these pictures Ichiha had drawn secretly harbored the potential to influence many things in this world, including public order, food culture, science and technology, and the economy.

Seriously, this is an incredible find...

It was frightening just to imagine how valuable these categorized drawings might be.

There was more to it than that, too. The one who had drawn these pictures, and who had found a sort of order in the chaotic mess of monsters, was merely a ten-year-old boy.

That was terrifying.

If I left him in Hakuya's care, what kind of monster would he grow into?

He was the unicorn of the Union of Eastern Nations. I could only sigh in admiration.

I want this kid for our country. I'd welcome him with favorable conditions if he'd just volunteer.

My instinct for quality human resources was screaming at me to buy in early and recruit him before he fully ripened.

"They say every one of Duke Chima's children is excellent... and it's true," I said. "Ichiha, you're probably the top, by far."

"N-Not at all! I don't get counted as one of the talented children!" Ichiha seemed flustered and waved his arms about wildly.

"You don't? Then you're not included in the reward?"

"Yeah. Because I'm weak, and they say I'm an oddball..."

"Seriously?" I said incredulously. "How can they be so blind?"

If I could've had Ichiha based on my contributions to the war, I would've shoved that Fuuga guy aside and gone for the glory of first place.

If that hadn't been recognized, I might have resorted to wielding my privilege as a great power.

No, wait. If he wasn't part of the reward, didn't that leave all the room in the world for negotiations? Oh! I wasn't so sure about suddenly pulling such a young kid away from his family, but... still...

"Sire," Aisha put in. "You're frowning incredibly hard. Is something the matter?"

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My grunting and agonizing over the question had ended up making Aisha worry again.

"Ohh, no," I said quickly. "I'm fine. Just fine."

Well, worrying about it here wasn't going to do any good.

First, I had to sound them out and see if there was room for negotiation.

"Ichiha, I'd like to ask you some more about the details," I said. "Would that be all right?"

"Huh...? Uh, sure... If you think it's worth talking to me..."

"Oh, I know! Let's talk about it at length over the fried sweets that Poncho gave us as we were leaving!" I gleefully led Ichiha out of the room.

Aisha and Tomoe looked at one another, not sure what to make of me acting so strangely because I was excited by this unexpected discovery.

"His Majesty always seems most animated when he meets an interesting person, doesn't he?" Aisha said. "This reminds of the time he first discovered Sir Poncho."

"Hee hee. It looks like I was right when I thought something might happen if I brought Big Brother and Ichiha together."

"You aren't His Majesty's little sister and Sir Hakuya's number one apprentice for nothing, huh?" Aisha gave her a pat on the head.

"Tee hee hee!" Tomoe giggled bashfully.

"Now then, shall we get going?" Aisha asked. "They're leaving us behind."

"Right!"

With wry smiles, the two of them chased after us.

It happened as I was leading Ichiha back to the room that had been prepared for us.

I saw a small figure walking in our direction from down the hall. As we approached, I realized it was a girl of about Tomoe's age, maybe a little older.

When the girl noticed us she went, "Ah!" and rushed over. "A black-haired young man with a female dark elf warrior as his bodyguard. Just like the information said."

She was about the same height as Tomoe, so did that make her twelve, maybe thirteen?

Wearing light blue clothing in the nomadic style, her deep blue hair tied in

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twintails, she gave off the impression of a strong girl with eyes full of vital energy. If I were to compare her to someone I knew, she was maybe the same type as Liscia or Naden. She would grow up to be a different sort of beauty than Tomoe in the future.

The other distinctive thing about her was the wings I could see over her shoulders.

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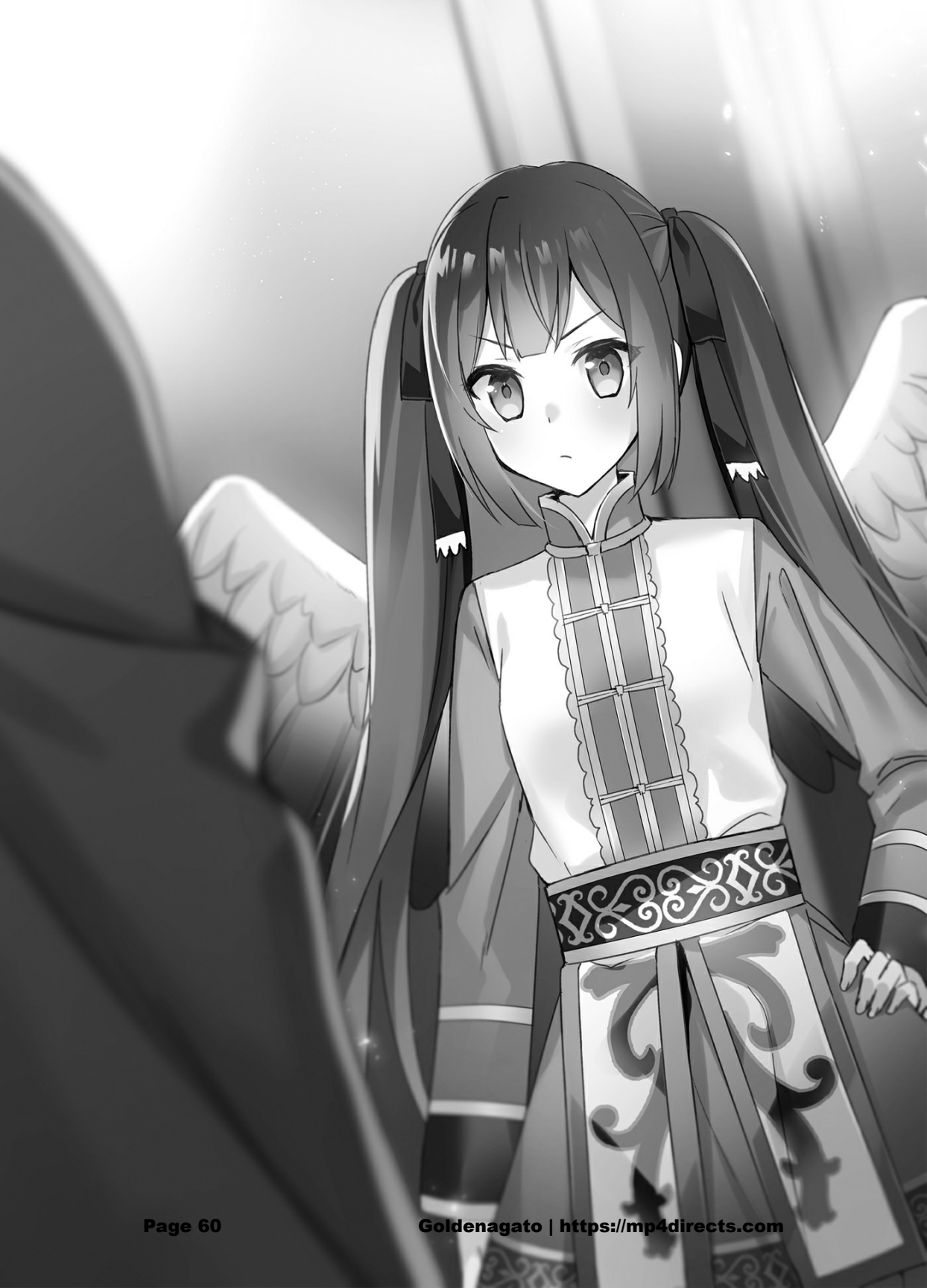

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“Would you happen to be the Sir Souma Kazuya that my brother was talking about?” the twintailed girl asked me, eyes full of fire. They were like the eyes of a hunter that had found her prey.

The staring made me feel awkward, and I scratched my cheek as I responded. “Well, yes, but... Wait, brother?”

That was when it hit me. Those wings, that hair color, could it be...?

“Are you Fuuga’s little sister, maybe?” I asked.

“My name is Yuriga Haan. I see... You must be the Great King of Friedonia.”

Great King, huh? It’d been a while since I’d been called that. The colossal squid and giant isopod both had Great King in their Japanese names, so it reminded me of gross-looking creatures, and I didn’t much like it.

Yuriga started staring at me again.

“You look weak for a ‘great king.’ My brother is much stronger,” she said bluntly.

It was a fact, so I shrugged it off. “Sure, if you’re going to compare me to Fuuga...”

“Hold on—Yuriga, was it? Don’t you think you’re being rude to His Majesty?” Aisha said, standing in front of her with a forced smile.

Oh, she was smiling, but, yeah, she was pretty pissed. She probably realized it would be immature to get seriously upset at a child, but her smile was getting stiffer.

Under pressure from our country’s strongest warrior’s smile (of rage), Yuriga faltered. “Ah...! Um... Er...”

Where had her spunk gone? Yuriga now looked completely terrified. She tensed up like a deer in the headlights and was unable to say another word.

This was kind of bad, wasn’t it? If we made her cry, it was likely to cause problems.

“Aisha, she’s just a kid... okay?” I said, trying to mollify Aisha.

I wasn’t fussed about what she’d said, and I didn’t want to start a fight with one of Fuuga’s relatives out of concern for how I looked as king...

Fuuga suddenly appeared and brought a fist down on Yuriga’s head. “You brat!”

Bop!

“Owwwww!”

The man was a warrior whom Aisha had described as stronger than her, so

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he must have been holding back, but it had still apparently hurt, because Yuriga was crouching and holding her head with tears in her eyes.

"You were told to stay put in our room!" Fuuga scolded. "You're always running off."

"Oww... But staying in the room is boring!"

"You're the one who decided to tag along! What were you thinking, just deciding to contact the king of another country on your own?! We aren't on the steppe here!"

Then Fuuga moved to stand in front of me, bowing his head and making his sister bow her head, too.

"Sorry for my sister. She's a troublesome little tomboy. If she did anything to offend you, I apologize. Go on, you too, Yuriga."

"Ah... I'm sorry..."

"Uh, no, you can raise your heads," I said uncomfortably. "She wasn't *that* rude, and she's just a kid. My own little sister was just up to the same sort of mischief anyway."

"It helps to hear you say that," Fuuga said, raising his head with a smile. Noticing Tomoe behind me, he added, "Is that the little sister you meant?"

"I-I'm Tomoe." Tomoe bobbed her head.

Seeing that adorable gesture, Fuuga grinned. "I see she knows her manners, unlike our cheeky little girl. Ah! I know! Hey, Souma. Since I'm already imposing on you, I've got a favor to ask..."

"A favor? Of me?"

"Yeah. If only for a little while, could you watch Yuriga for me?" He thrust his younger sister toward us.

Indignant at being treated like a cat or something, Yuriga loudly protested. "Wait, Big Brother?!"

However, Fuuga laughed, not seeming to care in the slightest. "Duke Chima's asked me to go around to all the camps on the battlefield, letting them know that reinforcements from the Kingdom of Friedonia will be arriving. It'll raise morale."

"I see..." I murmured.

"So, that being the case, I'd like you to look after Yuriga while I do that. It looks like you've got someone around her age with you, so it'll be less boring for Yuriga than staying in the room by herself."

"I don't mind, but... don't you want to leave a bodyguard with your

sister?" I asked.

Fuuga patted Yuriga on the head. "She's the type who'll shake her bodyguards so she can do as she pleases. Seeing as she's my sister and all, everyone spoils her, so I figure she'll be better behaved if she's with outsiders. Besides, Souma, you don't look like the type to mistreat a child someone's entrusted to you."

"It doesn't feel bad to be so trusted, but... You're a king yourself, aren't you, Fuuga? That makes Young Miss Yuriga a member of the royal family. I don't know about suddenly taking responsibility for some other country's royalty..."

"Don't be so stiff about it," Fuuga said. "I'm just asking you to baby-sit. Or, what, are you the type that lusts after children?"

"Hell no!"

"Ha ha ha! Well, that's a relief. It's just for a little while. Okay, I'm counting on you."

Giving us no time to respond, Fuuga took off running down the hall.

He shows up out of nowhere, pushes his little sister off on us, then leaves... He really is like a passing rain shower.

No, given how heated he could get, was he a sudden torrential downpour?

I glanced over at Yuriga. "He's always in a hurry, huh?"

"You can't blame him. That's just how my brother is." She was probably used to this kind of treatment, because Yuriga just shrugged.

Well, now that the guy who left her with us had run off, there wasn't much point standing around in the corridor forever.

"Should we head back to the room?" I asked.

In the guest room allotted to us, which seemed to be a little more nicely furnished than the rest, Aisha, Juna, Naden, and I were munching on the ginger snaps Poncho had given us as we listened to Ichiha's story.

"Oh, that happened...?" (Munch, munch.)

"Yes. That's right." (Munch, munch.)

The House of Chima was a nine-person family consisting of one father and eight children, their mother having passed away when they were young. The other brothers and sisters were gifted in martial arts, strategy, and magic, but compared to their fame, Ichiha with his weak body had felt out of place.

He wasn't on particularly bad terms with his siblings, but he had a

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complex from being compared to them. He was also considered strange for drawing pictures of monsters.

It seemed Mutsumi alone had tried to encourage Ichiha, but even she had apparently been unable to understand his gift.

“I dunno, it just seems like such a waste,” I said disappointedly.

“This area is thick with schemers, so only those with martial ability or strategic thinking are respected,” Ichiha explained. “Warriors who can achieve results on the battlefield, or strategists who can obtain an advantage in negotiations. I didn’t have anything like that.”

“Well... values change depending on where you live,” I admitted.

That was why no one had noticed this boy’s talent, huh? Not even his own family.

I felt bad for Ichiha, but when I thought that Tomoe had been the first to recognize his gift, I felt proud of her. It made me want to brag to everyone about how great my little sister was.

Of course, from the perspective of information secrecy, I was going to have to keep my mouth shut about it.

“Stop smirking,” Naden said. “It’s dead obvious what you’re thinking, okay?”

I slapped my cheeks. Had it been that easy to tell?

Looking over at Aisha and Juna... they blatantly averted their eyes.

...Apparently it had been. Well, that was no good.

Then I heard a bold voice. “And, honestly, that’s why my brother is just amazing, isn’t he?”

“O-Oh, yeah... I see...”

Next to us, Yuriga was regaling Tomoe with tales of her brother.

“So, after my brother took to the field and slew the enemy tribe’s brave warrior in an instant, the enemy’s warriors were terrified,” Yuriga went on. “They immediately broke ranks and fled. The temsbock cavalry ran them down, of course, so the enemy commanders all lost their heads.”

“U-Uhh... Wow...” Tomoe seemed a little put off, and she was listening with a polite-but-forced smile.

If someone was going to brag on and on about their family to her, yeah, that was probably the face she’d end up making.

Still, Yuriga didn’t seem to notice, so she went on telling the tale with glee.

“The flying tiger my brother rides is called Durga. I hear my brother met him when he went into the Demon Lord’s Domain alone. When he saw him fighting pack of monsters alone, my brother went to help. They became fast friends, and they’ve been together ever since.”

Fuuga had been into the Demon Lord’s Domain alone, with no bodyguards?!

No matter how far off the charts his strength was, that had to be reckless. That went beyond having guts and passed right into stupidity.

Also, that white tiger he rode was called a flying tiger?

“Hold on, it was a creature from the Demon Lord’s Domain?” I murmured, looking at Ichiha. “Could it be a monster?”

“I don’t know.” He shook his head. “I’ve never seen a creature like that before, either. Even if it was a monster, it would be a very unusual type. It’s the first time I’ve seen a creature that can fly without wings.”

“Really?” I glanced over at Naden. “There’s one closer to you than you might think, you know?”

She turned away peevishly, as if to say, *Don’t look at me when you say that.*

At first, I thought she was sulking because I’d treated her like an unusual creature, but then she added, looking mad, “Don’t lump me together with some tiger that can’t even assume human form!”

Was she feeling a sense of hostility toward Durga?

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Yuriga pinching Tomoe’s cheek. “Geez, you’ve just been smiling and nodding this whole time, Tomoe. Are you even listening?”

“Ahm lishning, ahm lishning!”

From the look on Tomoe’s face, it didn’t hurt. I was glad they weren’t fighting.

When Yuriga let go of Tomoe, she crossed her arms in front of her and puffed out her chest. “Well, I suppose you’re still too young to understand my brother’s greatness.”

“Murgh... How old are you, Yuriga?”

“Thirteen.”

“You’re only two years older than me.”

“It’s a huge difference. In another year I’ll be (just barely) able to marry.”

“Mugh...”

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It seemed marriageable age was low in this world.

Though, even by the standards of this world, fourteen would be considered early. Yuriga was mostly talking out of vanity, I'd assume. Besides, if they were competing over age, that made both of them children.

I looked over to the women in the room. "Is being old enough to marry something girls compete over?"

"...You're asking *us* that?" Naden asked incredulously.

"Thirteen is still an infant," Aisha replied. "We dark elves can't marry until we're thirty."

Well, they were from long-lived races, after all.

And both of them were stubborn about not telling me, so I didn't know either of their real ages.

"Marriage is a major event in a woman's life, after all," Juna said with a smile.

In conclusion, in this world with its wide range of lifespans, there was little point in comparing age, but maybe girls were still concerned about it.

Whatever the case, in just one day, Tomoe had made two friends (?) she could talk casually with. As her big brother figure, I had to be happy for her.

"He rides a tiger!" Yuriga exclaimed. "A tiger! My brother really is special, you know!"

"B-Big Brother rides a ryuu!"

"What, are you trying compete with me?!"

"Yes, I am!"

Perhaps they were getting mad, because I could swear there were fireworks going off where their eyes met.

...Maybe I needed to have a talk with Tomoe about choosing her friends more carefully.

It was a hard call.

Chapter 4: Finale

Evening. The monster attacks relented, and when we heard Fuuga had returned from the battlefield, we brought Yuriga to the courtyard, where he was bound to have landed.

When we arrived there...

“Ha ha ha! Good! Give me more!” Fuuga called.

“Don’t underestimate meeee!” Hal yelled back.

Hal and Fuuga were engaged in an intense exchange of blows.

Kaede and Ruby were there, too, so...

“Hey, why are they fighting?” I asked, but they must have been absorbed in watching the fight, because no response was forthcoming.

Hal’s Twin Snake Spears and Fuuga’s crescent blade screamed as they collided, the sound of the impact echoing several times.

Judging from the general attitude of the entranced soldiers who were watching, I assumed it was a mock battle, but because they were each using their favored weapons, the intensity was on another level.

Hal used two spears in a series of jabs at Fuuga, but Fuuga switched between the blade-end and the pommel of his crescent blade as he batted them away. Then, seeing an opening, Fuuga took a swing with his crescent blade, but Hal crossed his Twin Snake Spears to block it.

After an incredible back-and-forth battle, I couldn’t tell which had the superior martial prowess. However, Fuuga was the one who looked most composed.

“You’ve got good spirit! Even in my country, there aren’t many warriors as brave as you!” Fuuga called.

“Enough yammering! Don’t act like this is easy for you!”

Hal, on the other hand, seemed to be getting fired up... The guy was kind of the king of another country, so I wished he’d watch his words, but well, Fuuga wasn’t one to care.

Then Hal jumped back as Fuuga took a big swing, and while parrying the strike with one spear, he threw its twin toward Fuuga.

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He'd made the throw from an unbalanced position, but after just finishing an attack, Fuuga was unable to react so suddenly.

"Whoa, that's dangerous!" Fuuga bent his upper body backward and out of the way. It was possible to dodge like that?

In order to make a follow-up attack, Hal thrust out with his other spear once more.

"This settles it!" he yelled. "...?!"

"Halbert, was it? You really do have a good sense for this." Fuuga let go of his crescent blade and took hold of the Twin Snake Spear that had fallen to the ground. "Another five years of training, and maybe you'll catch up to me."

"Wha...! Whoa?!"

When Fuuga gripped the chain he'd taken hold of, he turned his body to swing Hal around. Like he was doing the hammer throw, Fuuga made Hal run in circles around him. Then, after one and a half times around, Fuuga let go of the chain, and the excess momentum made Hal fall to the ground.

Fuuga clapped his hands and said, "But by that point, I'll be even further ahead."

He was strong. He'd been literally swinging Hal around.

He possessed such overwhelming martial prowess that I could understand why Aisha would be wary of him.

"Hal!" Kaede cried.

"Hold on, are you okay?!"

Kaede and Ruby ran over to his side at the same time.

Hal's eyes must have been spinning, because he clutched his forehead, muttering, "He's strong..." to himself.

"Hm? Oh, if it isn't Souma." Having noticed us, Fuuga came over. "You have my thanks for looking after Yuriga. It was a big help."

"That's fine, but... Why exactly were you fighting our Halbert?"

"It was a mock battle, just a mock battle. If I fight nothing but weak monsters, my skills will rot. There was a guy who looked like he had some idea what he was doing, so I had him face me."

Weak monsters...? Fuuga was probably the only one who saw them that way.

In the Kingdom of Lastania, we hadn't known what traits the monsters had, so we'd observed their forms and behaviors, prepared ourselves, and

found an effective way to counter them.

Hakuya, Kaede, Julius, and I had all wracked our brains to come up with a strategy, with the understanding that monsters were frightening.

However, to Fuuga, that was all just petty tricks.

If he had the martial prowess to break through any troubles, and the guts to believe in that power, he could face any enemy without fear. He wasn't just a muscle head.

People gathered because they were drawn to Fuuga's valor, and they believed with him they could overcome anything.

Fuuga looked at Aisha beside me as he said, "I'd like to ask permission to face the young lady there, too."

"You mean Aisha?"

"I can tell from her face. She's quite skilled. I think it'd be a good fight."

"No, but that's..." I glanced over at Aisha.

Her eyes were burning with the desire to fight. "Sire, I also wish to fight with Sir Fuuga. It's not often I have the chance to face a man of his caliber. It will be a good chance to reflect on my own technique."

She was raring to go. Neither looked likely to back down.

"...Very well. But I don't want you getting hurt, or hurting him."

"Yes, sire. He is the king of another country, after all. I understand."

"Fuuga. Aisha is a woman who will be my queen. It would be a problem if she were to be injured."

"I get it. I'll hold back."

Ah... when she heard the words "hold back," Aisha must have taken that as a provocation, because she got upset.

...I was getting worried whether they both really understood me.

Then Aisha fell into a stance with her greatsword, and Fuuga readied his crescent blade.

"Then, I shall begin!"

"Let's do this!"

The two kicked off the ground simultaneously, and blade clashed with blade. In that instant, a noise or shockwave resounded, and all of the nearby soldiers had their heads knocked back.

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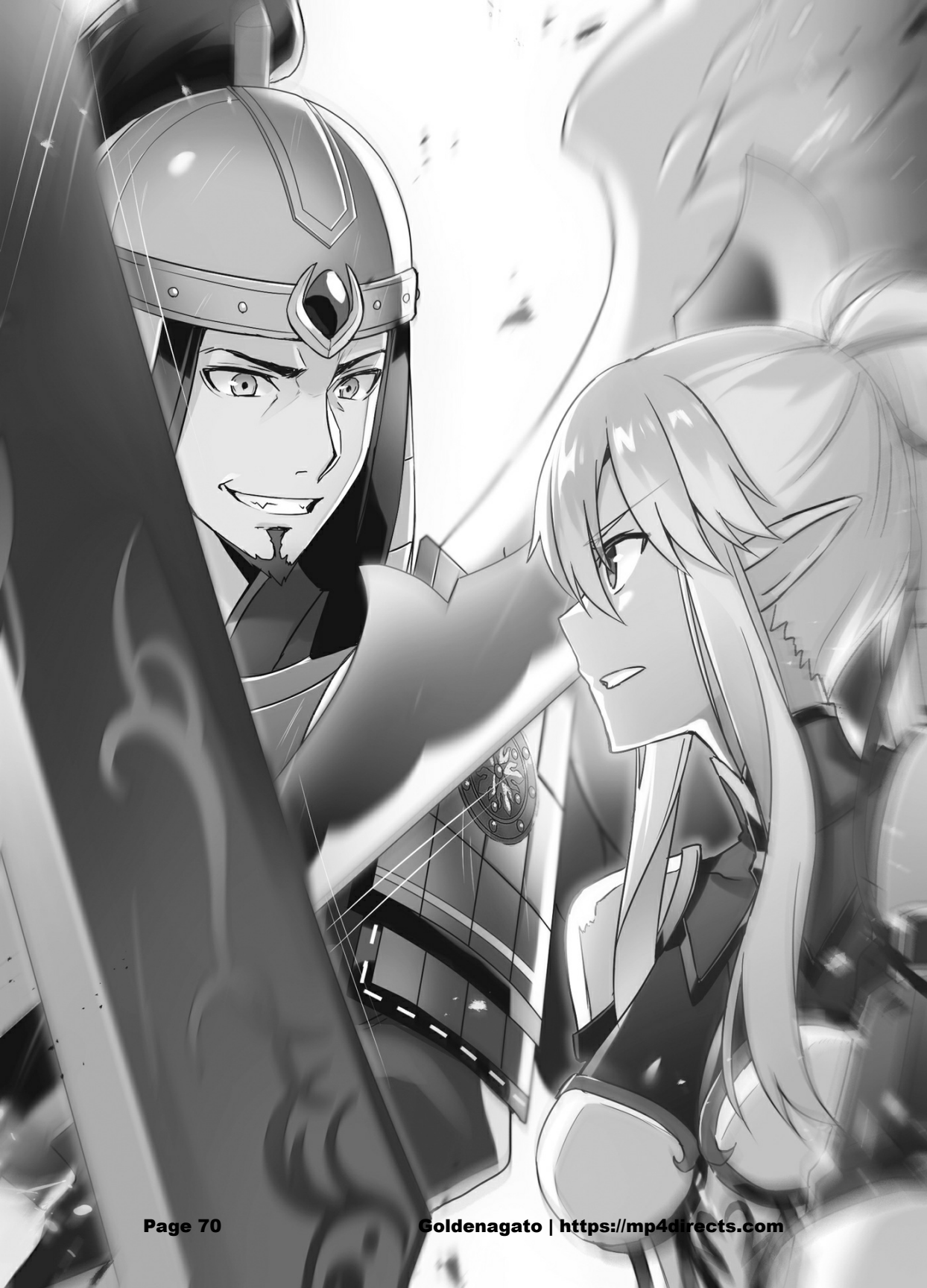

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From there, the two traded blow after blow. It wasn't a contest of skill like Fuuga's battle with Hal; it was a struggle to crush the enemy with brute strength.

The terrifying part was, while Fuuga had been able to overwhelm Hal with technique, he wasn't coming up short against Aisha's idiot strength, either. He had both power and finesse. He was what I could only call a natural warrior.

While trading blows with Aisha, he let out an amused laugh. "Is the kingdom a dungeon? You've got all sorts springing out of that place!"

While Fuuga seemed to be enjoying himself, Aisha was upset.

"If you're laughing during a fight, this must be easy for you."

"Not so much. Each and every blow is incredibly heavy. But...!"

When Aisha's greatsword tried to mow him down with a horizontal swing, Fuuga got into a position with one leg bent, the other leg stretched out (like during warm-up exercises) to slip under it and out of the way. Then, with a full horizontal swing of his crescent blade, he tried to strike Aisha's exposed torso.

"Urkh!"

Maybe having decided she wouldn't make it in time if she used the blade of her greatsword to block it, Aisha reacted by using the long hilt to do so instead. There was a loud clang. However, in her compromised stance, she couldn't hope to absorb the blow completely, and she was sent flying about five meters.

"Wait, Aisha got thrown?!" I cried.

"No, in order to avoid the impact, she jumped back on her own." Juna explained from beside me.

Looking at her, Aisha had landed nimbly, so being sent flying must have been part of her plan all along.

"Well, is it an even fight, then?"

"...No," Juna said. "When Sir Fuuga went to mow through Aisha's torso, he didn't do it with his blade, but with the hilt. He must have kept his promise not to injure her."

"Oh! That's why she was able to block with the hilt?"

"Yes, that's right. If he had hit with the blade... though her greatsword's hilt does have a steel core to it, she might not have been able to stop it with that."

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She'd been saved by how surprisingly honest Fuuga was? That was probably why Aisha had such a frustrated look on her face after fending off the attack.

Fuuga spun his crescent blade overhead like a windmill before readying it again.

"You rely too much on your inborn strength, Young Miss Aisha. That's gotten you by so far, I'm sure, but when you face an opponent with the same strength, superiority is determined by technique."

"I'm inexperienced... is what you're saying. The world truly is vast."

"Do you want to keep going?"

"Of course! Because as His Majesty's blade, as his shield, I cannot lose!"

"Ha ha ha! That's the spirit! You're well-loved, Souma!"

"Here I come!" Aisha went to face Fuuga again.

Though they were trading blows once more, it looked like Fuuga did hold the advantage.

There was no doubt he was among the top warriors on the continent. That man was a king, and there was a country he ruled. It was a terrifying thought.

However, Aisha wasn't the top warrior in our kingdom for nothing, so she was managing to hold her own against Fuuga somehow.

While I was absorbed in watching the fight, Mutsumi who was watching beside us, spoke up. "They both have such wonderful technique. Just watching them has got my blood boiling."

Mutsumi looked over at Juna.

"From what I can tell, you practice the martial arts yourself. Would you care for a match with me?"

Having said that, Mutsumi offered Juna a wooden sword.

"I specialize in surprise attacks, not frontal ones." Although she said that, Juna took the wooden sword. "But I was interested in you, too, Madam Mutsumi."

"You were?"

"Yes. In your beautiful face and fighting skills that make the commanders of the union obsess over you." Juna readied her sword with a wink at me. "Because making His Majesty obsess over me is my job."

I couldn't help but be entranced by Juna's mischievous smile.

"I didn't expect you to start flirting." Mutsumi smiled wryly as she, too, readied her wooden sword. It looked as though Mutsumi's had a longer

blade. Now that I thought about it, she'd had a long sword on her back, so she must have prepared one similar to what she was used to using. "However, if it means I can fight you, then that's convenient. Let's fight fair and square."

"All right... Here I come."

Their wooden swords collided, and a loud clacking sound echoed.

Mutsumi seemed to hold the advantage due to her reach giving each of her attacks that much more weight, but Juna was doing a good job of chasing off her attacks using quick movements and a large number of moves.

If one went on the offensive, the other was forced on the defensive, and when attacker and defender changed roles, the person doing better changed, too. It was a back-and-forth battle.

While fighting, they both smiled as if enjoying it.

"Impressive," Juna said. "I can see why all the soldiers would be charmed by your marvelous fighting techniques."

Mutsumi returned the compliment in kind. "I could say the same of you. It's not fair that you have these sharp skills to go with that beautiful face."

When they pulled away from each other to catch their breath, Mutsumi let out a sigh.

"It seems Father wants me to seduce Sir Souma, but... if he has a person like you at his side, I don't see myself winning him over with the martial ability of seduction."

"Your techniques are very direct," Juna said. "I very much doubt you had any intention of going through with that."

Mutsumi let out a troubled laugh. "Not for myself, no. But when you come from a house of schemers, there are times when you have no choice. Hee hee, thankfully, I'll have an easier time refusing now. I really do want to choose the man I marry for myself."

"As a fellow woman, I want to support you there."

There were still limits on the advancement of women in society in this world. But the women in this world had the strength not to lose to them. Seeing the two of them, I realized that all over again.

Having taken a breather, the two began trading blows again.

Aisha and Fuuga, and Juna and Mutsumi. It didn't seem like any of the four of them would stop fighting easily, so I headed over to where Hal was being tended by Kaede and Ruby.

Hal frowned when he noticed me coming. "...Souma. Looks like you've

caught me looking uncool."

"If you ask me, anyone who can fight is pretty cool, you know?"

Like Aisha, or Juna. If Liscia were there, too, she'd have been happily getting in on the action, too, I'm sure.

I wanted to have a little talk with just us guys, so I asked the women to excuse themselves.

Once Juna and Naden had taken Kaede and Ruby away, I sat down next to Hal. "So, how does he look to you? That Fuuga guy, I mean."

Hal let out a sigh.

"...Scary. Not just the strength he has, but the air around him, too."

"The air around him is scary?"

"Yeah. When I split off from you guys and chased after him, before I knew it, I felt myself being pulled in by the atmosphere around him. I was thinking how great it'd be if I could fight like him, or how, if I could die like that, I'd have no regrets. It was only for a moment, but I did. Even though there's no way that's true."

Halbert laughed mockingly at himself. I quietly listened as he spoke.

"If I died and left Kaede and Ruby behind, more than anyone, I wouldn't be able to forgive myself for that. But for that moment, I was accepting it. If you hadn't told me to remember their faces, and if Ruby hadn't stopped me, I might have gotten in even deeper with him. Did you give me that advice because you knew it would happen?"

"Hardly," I said. "I was just putting down some insurance because I was worried. Because, of all the people I know, you're the closest to Fuuga."

When I said that with a wry smile, Hal cocked his head to the side. "We're close? You mean we're similar?"

"In terms of personality, yeah. You both are exceptionally courageous, and are always aiming to move upward, right?"

"It's hard to answer that myself..."

While Hal scratched his nose in embarrassment, I smiled wryly and told him, "That's how it looks to someone else. And people like that draw in those who will fight with them. Like you. You're seen as someone special in the National Defense Force, right?"

"Huh? I am?"

"You've been fighting on my side since the battle near Randel, right? I think you did a lot to distinguish yourself in battle against the forces of the

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Principality of Amidonia, too, and you even became a dragon knight in the Star Dragon Mountain Range."

"Th-That just sort of happened on its own, you know?!"

"I told you, didn't I? This is about how you look from the outside. Then, in the Kingdom of Lastania, many soldiers witnessed the red dragon flying through the skies. Of course you were going to end up with a nickname."

"Whaa?! Hold on, what do you mean a nickname?!"

Huh? Hal didn't know?

"The Red Oni... That's what the soldiers of the National Defense Force call you, you know?"

Hal was silent. He really hadn't known.

Oh, right.

I stood up and headed over to the gondola Naden had carried here. Then, pulling something from the luggage, I returned to Hal and presented it to him.

"What's this?" he asked.

"It's a hachigane. With oni horns on it."

It was a hachigane (a kind of protector worn on the forehead) with oni horns decorating the metal part of it.

"It looks like you've become famous as the Red Oni, so I had Taru the blacksmith make this for you. We've been so busy lately, I forgot to hand it over. If you wrap this around your head, they'll know you're the Red Oni right away. I figure that'll raise allies' morale, and demoralize the enemy. It'll be perfect for hiding that red wound on your forehead, so why not try it on right now?"

Hal accepted the oni hachigane, still looking dumbfounded. It seemed his mind hadn't caught up with what was happening yet.

This was the moment Hal the Red Oni was born, but Hal looked totally out of it at the time.

Well, if Hal continued to distinguish himself from here on, I was sure the playwrights of a later era would find some way to dramatize this scene and make it cool.

So, give it your all, Hal.

That night...

"You're looking pretty cool, Hal," Kaede said.

"I like how the horns on your head kind of match mine," Ruby agreed.

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“R-Really?”

Hal had put the oni hachigane on right away, but he seemed not at all unhappy with the praise Kaede and Ruby were giving him for it. He liked anything that served him. Well, not that I could blame him for feeling that way.

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In the room with me were Aisha, Juna, Naden, Halbert, Kaede, Ruby, Kuu, and Leporina. We were about to go through a final confirmation of what we would do from here.

They had said they wanted to watch, too, so little Tomoe and Ichiha were sitting on chairs over by the wall.

I spread the map of the area around Wedan that I had borrowed from Duke Chima across the table.

“Now then, I’d like to get started...”

Having said that, I glanced over beside Tomoe. For some reason, Yuriga was sitting there like she had every right to.

“Didn’t you go back to Fuuga?” I asked.

“Well, I don’t have anything better to do. My brother falls asleep quickly on days where he goes wild on the battlefield.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to come to us.”

“This is the only place with kids my age. Please, I won’t get in the way!” Yuriga put her hands together and pleaded.

If I treated her badly, I felt like it’d hurt my relationship with Fuuga later... Guess there was nothing else for it.

“Just watch quietly, okay?” I sighed.

“I know that.”

“Hahh... Okay, Kaede, go ahead with the explanation, please.”

“Got it. Please look at the map, you know.” My staff officer Kaede stood up, pointing to the map as she spoke. “This is the current deployment of the Union of Eastern Nations. We will be joining up with the reinforcements from the Kingdom of Friedonia, so we will not be joining this deployment. The overall flow is simple. While the forces of the Union of Eastern Nations are holding back the invading monsters, we in the forces of the Kingdom of Friedonia strike them from behind, encircling and eliminating the monsters quickly. That is all.”

“...Huh? That’s all?” Hal sounded disappointed. He must have expected a more detailed explanation.

Seeing Hal like that, Kaede shut him down. “Hal, our forces outnumber the monsters, and our equipment is superior. It’s a simple plan, but in the current situation, it is the most certain and effective tactic we can use.”

“S-Sure... I get it.” Having been given a reasonable explanation, Hal stayed quiet.

Well, Kaede was giving it her stamp of approval, so she was probably right.

I told everyone, “We will join up with the main force led by Ludwin tonight. Hal, Kaede, Ruby, you will be fighting under Ludwin’s command. As for Tomoe... I’d be worried about leaving her in this castle, so I’ll keep her at my side, I think.”

“Okay, Big Brother.”

“Aisha, Juna, Naden, please join the main force, too.”

“““Understood.”””

“Roger that.”

“Are there any other questions?” I asked.

“Over here, Bro.” The first hand to shoot up was Kuu’s. “Is it okay for us to fight this time?”

“No, that’s not happening. I was so short-handed that I wanted your help in the Kingdom of Lastania, but now we have the forces to overwhelm the enemy. This time, I’d like you to sit tight.”

Kuu clasped his hands behind his head and pursed his lips. “Tch. Well, can we stay here in Wedan Castle, then? I want to watch how the Union of Eastern Nations’ forces fight from this side.”

“I don’t really mind, but... don’t go joining the front line just because we’re not around to see it. If anything were to happen to you, I could never face Sir Gouran.”

“Ookyakya! I know that.” Kuu nodded, but I couldn’t help but worry.

I looked over at Leporina. “Leporina. I feel bad giving you what sounds like an order when you’re not my retainer, but keep a close eye on Kuu for me. If he looks like he’s going to join the front line, can I count on you to do whatever it takes to stop him?”

“Urgh... I don’t know that I can stop him, but I’ll do my best,” she said.

“Please do. If you want, you’re welcome to shoot out his legs with that bow of yours.”

“Ookya?! Bro, isn’t that a little harsh?!” Kuu protested, but I decided to ignore him. If Kuu got hurt badly, it was liable to turn into a diplomatic incident, so I wanted him to show some restraint.

I figured that, for now, I was done with giving orders.

But...

“Um, Souma.” Ichiha, who had been sitting in on the meeting, hesitantly

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raised his hand.

“What is it?”

“Um... would it be all right if I went, too? I think if I was in the Kingdom of Friedonia’s camp, I could safely get a look at living monsters from up close.”

“Huh? ...I wonder.”

Knowing Ichiha’s rare gift when it came to monsters, I wanted to give him the opportunity to observe them. But, well... It was true, the main camp would be safe, but was it okay for me, as an adult, to be bringing a small child who was from another country with me?

I hesitated, but it seemed Ichiha was serious about this.

“I’ll go ask Father for permission myself. How about it?”

“If Duke Chima gives permission, I guess it’s okay,” I said slowly.

I personally wanted to have Ichiha learn more about monsters, so if he could get permission, it was probably fine.

While I was thinking that, suddenly Yuriga stood up. “Then I’m going, too! I want to see how the Great King of the South fights!”

She puffed up her underdeveloped chest as she made that declaration, but if she wanted to see me fight, uhh...

“I’m just going to be sitting put in the main camp, you know?” I said. “It’d be an inconvenience for everyone else, too.”

“You are? Then I want to see how you command...”

“I leave commanding to Ludwin. I’m seriously just going to be there.”

“...Is there even any reason for you to be on the battlefield?” With an exasperated look on her face, she came right out and hit me where it hurt.

“Hold on, Yuriga, don’t you think that’s being a little rude to Big Brother Souma?” Tomoe complained, looking upset.

However, Yuriga snorted derisively, showing no sign that bothered her. “When my brother stands on the battlefield and performs courageous feats, everyone follows him and is ready to fight to the death. Isn’t that what leading people is all about?”

“People will fight for Big Brother without seeing him fight,” Tomoe said. “Aisha, Hal, and everyone else, they’re all fighting on their own initiative.”

“Leaving everything to other people? Isn’t that a bit lame, for a king?” Yuriga complained.

“It is not!”

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When Yuriga shrugged as if trying to provoke her, Tomoe bared her canine teeth in open anger. This might have been the first time I'd seen her make that face.

I patted the growling Tomoe on the head with an "It's okay," before I said to Yuriga, "Well, if we're talking about who's cooler, Fuuga wins that one, sure. I'd love to be able to fight like he does, and I admire his strength."

"Well, obviously," Yuriga said with a smug look.

It was cute seeing a kid so proud of her family like this. Though it did mean she was selling me short.

"But I'm not Fuuga, and I can't become like him. That goes for everyone else, too. No matter how much they admire and follow him, no one can be Fuuga but Fuuga. If they insist on trying to become like Fuuga, they're going to die an early death."

Something about that may have rung true with Yuriga. "That's..." She came up with no response.

That was because Fuuga acted as if he was living too fast.

He went into the Demon Lord's Domain alone; he charged into the middle of swarms of enemies by himself... Fuuga was still alive because of who he was, and anyone who tried to imitate him would die.

"Try as I might, I can only ever be me," I told her. "That's why I'll defend the country and my family my own way. That means borrowing other people's help in the areas I'm weak in. That's somehow been able to let me keep the country going through everything that's happened so far. I don't care if it's lame; if I can defend what's important to me, I think that's good enough."

Yuriga stared at me blankly. "You're... a weird king, huh."

"I'm well aware."

"Hmm... Well, now I want you to bring me along in the main camp even more."

"Why?! I told you I don't fight, right?!"

"I mean, you're a completely different type of person from my brother, so now you've got me curious why people would follow you. Come on, it's fine, right? I'll get permission from my brother."

When she looked at me with pleading eyes, I shrugged my shoulders. Guess I had no choice. Having just given Ichiha permission, I couldn't tell Yuriga she was the only one not allowed.

If I refused, it was possible she'd suspect I was giving Ichiha favorable treatment.

"If you actually get permission from Fuuga..."

"All right! Well, I'll go get permission, then!" No sooner had she said that than she dashed out of the room.

Her initiative to act on things the moment she said them might have had something in common with Roroa.

They were both little sisters, too.

Later, because both Duke Chima and Fuuga gave permission, we ended up bringing three little kids back to the main camp with us.

Fortunately, Tomoe (a mystic wolf), Ichiha (a human), and Yuriga (some sort of crow tengu-style beastman) reminded me of a dog, monkey, and pheasant.

Were we going oni-slaying? Who was Momotarou?

We did have a Red Oni on our side, though.

◇ ◇ ◇

Thick clouds covered the sky, and the strong wind felt cold on the skin that day.

In the camps of the forces of the Union of Eastern Nations near the walls surrounding Wedan's city, the commanders from each country that had led an army here were raising their voices to inspire their troops.

"Listen! Reinforcements from the Kingdom of Friedonia will soon arrive!"

"These reinforcements are a grand army of 50,000, and the battle for Wedan will no doubt end today! In short, today will be our last chance to earn battlefield glories!"

"Once the forces of the Kingdom of Friedonia arrive, there will be no place left for us to distinguish ourselves! We can't let Malmkhitan's cavalry hog all the glory!"

"The reward is Duke Chima's six children. That means only six countries can be rewarded. We all must strive to be one of those six!"

"""""Ohhhhhhh!"""""

Battle shouts rose up from camps here and there.

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Learning of the impending arrival of the Kingdom of Friedonia's forces, the generals of the Union of Eastern Nations were attempting to raise their fervor for one last show of glory.

The soldiers moved into action in response to their generals' incitement.

Up on the walls surrounding Wedan, watching those forces of the Union of Eastern Nations, was Kuu.

"Ookyakya! They've all gone mad! They must want to take the beautiful Madam Mutsumi for themselves pretty badly!"

"You say that, but the truth is you want to join in, too, don't you, Young Master?" Leporina said, sounding exasperated with the playful Kuu. "Lady Mutsumi was pretty, after all."

"Hmm? I'd love to go wild down there, but I'm not really interested in Young Miss Mutsumi. I'm more into the type of cute girls who'll make me want to protect them despite myself."

"Is that the type of girl Taru is?"

"She used to be a crybaby, remember? She's gotten stubborn now, though."

"Now that you mention it... That's right."

Kuu, Taru, and Leporina were childhood friends. Leporina could remember those days long ago.

When they were children, Taru had been shy and a crybaby, always hiding behind Kuu or Leporina. Kuu would try to get her to laugh, doing naughty things, spinning his wheels, and just making Taru cry even more. Then Kuu would be hit by his father Gouran, and Leporina would be lectured, too, for her failure to control him.

It must have been around puberty that their relationship had taken a turn.

Kuu could only communicate his affection to Taru in a joking way, Taru couldn't be true to her feelings even when she felt affection for Kuu, and because Leporina knew their feelings for each other, she maintained a position that wasn't cruel to Taru, but which let her stay at Kuu's side.

Before she knew it, a strange three-way relationship had formed between them.

Will this relationship change someday, too? If possible, I hope it can take a form that all three of us want. For that, do I need to make a move myself?

It happened while Leporina was pondering that question.

"Oh! Is that him over there?!" Kuu stood up, saying that as he looked at a

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specific point on the battlefield.

When Leporina followed his line of sight, there was a white tiger racing across the battlefield. It was Fuuga's mount, Durga. Did that mean the speck on its back was Fuuga?

Fuuga and Durga looked like a ship sailing smoothly across a sea of monsters.

While watching that scene, Kuu let out a sigh. "Fuuga Han, was it? I can see why he had Bro worried. Man, it sure is a wide world out here. To think there was an incredible guy like that hiding in it."

"Is he incredible? He's certainly strong, I agree..."

In response to Leporina's skepticism, the corners of Kuu's mouth turned up in a slight smile.

"He's not just strong. The guy's pure. You could call him the greediest man in the world. He'll reach out for what he wants over and over, trying to grasp it. Even if it's in the fire, and it's something that will burn him badly if he tries to take it. Seriously, he's scary."

Despite saying that the man was scary, Kuu seemed amused.

"Even when it comes to things Bro or Empress Maria would hesitate to touch, he'll reach for them without hesitation. On the day that he has more power than he does now, his pure greed may cover this whole continent. Ohh, this is scary, scary stuff."

It was a bit too abstract for Leporina to understand what Kuu was trying to say. However, one thing she could say for certain was that Kuu was convinced about something.

"Is this your intuition, Young Master?"

"Well, something like that, but I'm confident. He embodies the life I idealize. He's chasing a huge dream, and he's got the power to make it real. If I could live like that, it'd feel great... but if he becomes an enemy, he'll be trouble."

When he said that, Kuu's smile vanished, and he glared straight in Fuuga's direction.

"The Republic of Turgis is cold, and the currents in the air make it so wyverns can't fly. That's been a problem for us, but at the same time, it's had the benefit of preventing outside countries from attacking. Even if they could conquer us, we'd be hard to rule, so there's little for them to gain. That's why Bro and Madam Maria wouldn't think to attack us."

"...And Fuuga would be different?" Leporina hesitantly asked.

Kuu sat down and crossed his legs. "His dream becomes the dream of those who follow him. If he were dreaming of unifying the continent, then if it meant a little... no, even a lot of losses for no return, I'm sure he'd invade. Just to make his dream come true."

"No..."

"If you were to ask Bro, he might have a different perspective, but that's how it feels to me. We can't take it easy. There's no guarantee Bro or Madam Maria will stop him for us. We've gotta build a country for ourselves that won't lose, even if he comes to invade us."

Leporina was silent.

There were already hints of a ruler-like dignity in Kuu's eyes, making Leporina lose herself in them despite herself. She didn't know if he was aware of it himself, but by going outside the Republic of Turgis, Kuu had been steadily maturing.

Leporina pressed on her chest as her heart pounded.

In order to stay with Master Kuu for all my life, I must... be prepared.

At some point, the flames of determination had begun to burn in Leporina's eyes, too.

At that time, the forces of the Union of Eastern Nations began to stir. That was because they had spotted the 50,000 strong forces of the Kingdom of Friedonia on the other side of the swarm of monsters.

Thus, the demon wave moved toward its final stage.

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Did it happen a little after noon?

"How's that? Can you see it now?"

Around the time that the kingdom's National Defense Force finished deploying and began to encircle and exterminate the monsters, Aisha was standing in the main camp with Tomoe and Ichiha sitting on her shoulders.

The reason they were riding on her shoulders was because the little ones had said, "We can't see the battle very well from here."

We were deployed on the high ground, so we could see the entire army's movements, but because we had shields set up in front of us to stop arrows, among other things, the children's short stature made it impossible for them

to see.

"Okay, we can see much better now," Tomoe said. "Thank you very much."

In contrast to the delighted Tomoe, Ichiha seemed more hesitant. "Y-Yes, it's true we can see better, but... I'm not so sure about making the candidate to become the Kingdom of Friedonia's second primary queen do this..."

However, Aisha said, "This is nothing," and laughed it off. "You two weigh next to nothing, so don't worry yourselves about it."

"No, um... It's not about the weight, it's about how inappropriate this is..."

He was having a woman who was going to be a queen let him ride on her shoulders, so I could understand how Ichiha felt. But our country was pretty easygoing on that sort of stuff, you know. Me included.

I would act appropriately for my position when I was performing official duties, but I really didn't like the idea of acting self-important around the clock. If I didn't take a load off when I could, my shoulders felt stiff.

"Aisha's saying it's fine, so it's probably fine, don't you think?" I told Ichiha with a wry smile.

"S-Souma!" he protested.

"Come on now, you came to sketch monsters, didn't you?" I said. "You've got to actually do it."

"Urkh... Okay."

Ichiha put the drawing board around his neck, and his charcoal began racing across the paper.

"She doesn't have to let them sit on her shoulders," Naden, who had been watching the three of them from beside me, suggested, crossing her arms. "Couldn't I just transform and fly? The kids should be safe in the gondola."

I wouldn't be going out onto the field of battle myself this time, so it seemed she was stuck in the main camp with nothing to do. I gave a dissatisfied Naden a gentle pat on the head.

"If you did that, I'd have to assign wyvern cavalry to escort you, wouldn't I? Every member of the wyvern cavalry we brought is participating in battle, so we can't cause any more trouble for them."

"I'm pretty sure with both me and Aisha there, we'd be fine no matter what flying monsters came."

"If you were taking the two kids, it'd be in a gondola. It's dangerous fighting while you carry a gondola, right? I mean, if anything were to happen

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to Ichiha while we're taking care of him for Duke Chima, it'd be a big problem."

"...You have a point." It looked like Naden was convinced.

But, as we were talking...

"Aren't you people a little too relaxed here?" Yuriga, who was also beside me, looked at us with cold eyes. "This is the final battle with those monsters, isn't it? Shouldn't you be more tense, more...? That's it, serious! Don't you need to act serious?"

"You say that, but it's just a matter of surrounding and crushing them now..." I said.

This time, while the forces of the Union of Eastern Nations were holding the enemy back, the forces of the Kingdom of Friedonia were going to attack in the crane wing formation. The units on the left and right wings would gradually fan out, encircling and eliminating the enemy. It was a simple plan.

To sum it up briefly, it was, "Surround them with everything we've got."

If I wanted to avoid letting monsters escape, I should have worked with the other countries to divide the labor, but the forces of the union were in the middle of one last struggle to distinguish themselves.

It might not have been impossible, but they weren't in a position to coordinate closely with us at the moment.

What we could do was do our best to encircle the enemy, and finish off as many monsters here as we possibly could.

The important thing was that the monsters didn't escape as a pack. If few of them escaped, and they were split up, sending a request to the defense forces of each country and the adventurers' guild would be enough to handle them.

"We just have to play our role," I said. "Which, for me, is staying put in the main camp, and that's about it. If I try to go out to the front, I'll just be causing undue trouble."

"It really is a mystery," Yuriga said. "Without showing strength or ferocity, it's a wonder the soldiers are willing to follow you, you know that?"

"Now listen, you. Don't you think the way you've been talking is a little rude?" Naden glared at Yuriga. She was letting off a little of her ryuu intimidation, so an ordinary child might have burst into tears just looking her in the eye.

However, Yuriga stared Naden right in the eye and said, "Come on!

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People will submit to someone stronger than them, but if you show even a moment's weakness, they'll leave you. When my father died, I watched as a number of clans left the House of Haan or plotted to betray us. Those clans were all obliterated by my brother when he took over, of course."

Being hit with such a heavy topic as if it was nothing, Naden was at a loss for words. "Yuriga, you..."

It seemed it wasn't just Fuuga; Yuriga had lived a different life from the one most people lead, too.

"People must be brought together and led with strength," Yuriga insisted. "That's what my brother is always saying."

The steppes of Malmkhitan were like the Union of Eastern Nations in miniature. There were a variety of small and medium-sized factions vying for power, unifying and then splitting up once more. In a world like that, he likely did have no choice but to unite them through power. No one could say that it was a mistake to do so.

"I'm sure ruling through might was the right way to do things in Malmkhitan." I crouched down in front of Yuriga, meeting her at eye level as I spoke. "But the world is more than just the steppes or the Union of Eastern Nations. Values are formed by the nature of the region and shared history, so it's more complicated than that. There's a nation ruled with religious authority, and a nation united by the monetary bonds of mercenary contracts. There's a country like the Gran Chaos Empire which raises the flag of ideals to confront the Demon Lord's Domain, too."

"...I don't really get it."

"Oh, um... Well, maybe this wasn't the best conversation to have with a thirteen-year-old."

"Don't treat me like a child!"

"That's such a line a kid would say."

"Grr..." Yuriga ground her teeth.

I wasn't being very adult in the way I was treating a kid, huh?

But still... Hearing her story, I felt a little bad for her. Feeling unable to leave her alone, I wanted to offer some advice, but if it wasn't going to get through to her, there wasn't much point.

Now then, how could I say this...?

"I know... If you get the opportunity, you should come to my country. That way you'll meet all sort of people, and come in contact with the

differing lives they lead. If you do that, I'm sure you'll encounter value systems that are different from your own."

"Hmm... Is that how it is?" Yuriga asked.

"That is how it is."

Yuriga didn't seem entirely convinced, but she eventually nodded. "I'll at least keep it in mind."

Then, at that moment, a cheer rose up from the battlefield. The encirclement of the monsters had just been completed.

The huge monsters like the zombie rhinosauruses were being defeated by a focused attack from the temsbock cavalry led by Fuuga and Durga, as well as the wyvern cavalry led by Hal and Ruby.

Massive lightning arced all over, and intense flames blew about wildly.

The monsters attempted to flee when they saw the huge ones going down, but the encirclement was already complete. The vast majority either threw themselves at the soldiers in the formation and were killed, or were crushed by the encirclement with nowhere to go.

It was a one-sided trampling.

What had once been so many writhing monsters turned into lifeless corpses, and eventually the sound of screams and death cries vanished from the battlefield.

The thick clouds that had covered the sky scattered, and when it was dyed red by the setting sun, the soldiers cheered. "Hip, hip, hurray!"

That was the cry that heralded the end of the monster wave.

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It was evening on the monster corpse-littered battlefield, with the skies dyed red.

With the extermination of the monsters complete, I had the forces of the Kingdom of Friedonia set up camp while I rode Naden and returned to Wedan Castle with a select group of my companions. That was because I had to return Ichiha and Yuriga to their respective guardians.

We set down in the courtyard like when we had come yesterday, and Duke Chima, also like yesterday, greeted us with a broad smile.

"Ohh, Sir Souma! Thanks to the Kingdom of Friedonia, the monsters are eliminated, and my country freed from the crisis. I don't know how to thank

you.”

I could only smile wryly as Duke Chima took my hand and made an exaggerated show of gratitude. There was likely a heaping helping of lip service in what he was saying, so I was just listening to hear what he would say.

“We just relied on our numbers to let us make the last push,” I said hesitantly. I didn’t want him to inflate what I’d done too much. “It’s nothing compared to the efforts exerted by those who’ve been fighting all this time.”

Yuriga, who was beside me, crossed her arms and nodded in agreement. “It’s true, Sir Souma just sat in the main camp and watched the battlefield.”

“Mrrgh, there you go, saying that again, Yuriga...” Tomoe protested, but Yuriga just looked away peevishly.

“Hmph, well, it’s true, isn’t it? On that point, my brother Fuuga really distinguished himself on today’s battlefield. You saw, didn’t you, Tomoe? The way that huge zombie rhinosaurus got fried. That was absolutely my brother’s shot.”

“I saw, but... that’s what my teacher would call rash courage, you know?”

“No matter what kind it is, courage is courage! He’s brave and strong! Truly a king among kings!”

“Mrrrgh... Weak kings can be great, too. Lord Albert and Big Brother can both make decisions for everyone.”

There may have been sparks flying where Tomoe and Yuriga’s eyes met... but they were just kids, so it only looked like they were having a staring contest.

“Now, now, Tomoe, Yuriga, both of you calm down.” Ichiha got between them and tried to mollify them both.

With his sharp eyes, Duke Chima spotted the boy doing that, and, “Ohh!” he exclaimed with the smile of an affable middle-aged man. “It seems our once shy Ichiha has become fast friends with your little sister! They’re so close in age, I might have expected they would grow close quickly!”

“Ahaha... Is that how it works?” I laughed wryly.

Could Duke Chima not see Tomoe and Yuriga glaring at one another with teeth bared despite their closeness of age?

Even if they were just kids, the friendship between Ichiha and Tomoe might get the duke a connection to our kingdom... was what I was sure he was thinking.

I should have expected as much from a man whose diplomatic acumen had allowed his country to maintain its independence in a region rife with wars between small and medium-sized powers. He wasn't to be underestimated.

"I'm grateful to your little sister for getting along with Ichiha," Duke Chima added.

"Ahaha..."

I knew I probably shouldn't get too deeply involved with a crafty fellow like him, but now that I knew how skilled Ichiha was, I couldn't treat the man too poorly. Although, if he knew I was so interested in Ichiha, he might try to use that.

For now, I had no choice but to mask my inner feelings with polite laughter.

Then Duke Chima took my hand again and said, "Tonight, we will be having a little banquet to celebrate this victory. I will be carrying out the conferment of awards there, so I would very much like for you to attend, Sir Souma."

"Oh, right. I will be participating," I nodded.

Duke Chima nodded with satisfaction at my response and took Ichiha back inside the castle with him. When we were about to return to our room, too...

"Oh! Big Brother," Yuriga said looking up into the sky.

When I looked up, a big white tiger was in the process of descending.

It was Fuuga and Durga.

Durga must have gotten covered in monster blood, because his white fur was stained dark red in some places. When I was looking up at the massive Durga, Fuuga poked his head out over the side.

"Hey, I see you people are back, too."

"Yeah," I said. "It sounds like you really did a great job out there."

"Well, yeah. When the forces of Friedonia showed up, I suddenly found all my prey had gone missing, though. I wanted to go wild a bit longer, but, what can you do...? Oh, right." Fuuga jumped down from Durga, bringing his face close to mine. "Hey, Souma. You've got a flying mount, too, don't you? That black one."

"...Uh, yeah. Though she's not so much my mount as my fiancée."

"Fiancée...? Well, whatever. Why don't we have a little talk up in the sky?

Let's have a heart-to-heart, as fellow rulers."

Before I could even respond, Aisha cut in. "As His Majesty's bodyguard, I cannot allow that!"

Fuuga tossed his bow and quiver of arrows to Yuriga, thrusting his crescent blade into the ground. "It's just small talk. We'll leave all the weapons here. My rock-rending blade, Zanganto, too."

Was that weapon that was like the Green Dragon Crescent Blade called Zanganto? From the sense of weight it had when it was thrust into the ground, it certainly did seem like it could split rock.

"Besides, even if it is just the two of us, that strong dragon will be there, too, right?" Fuuga asked. "If I try something, she can fly off, or attack me, or whatever."

"But..." Aisha still had a look of uncertainty on her face.

I could understand her unease.

This was Fuuga. Even unarmed, he could easily kill me. Aisha was thinking that, if he should try, Naden might not be able to defend me alone. That was just how much caution Fuuga warranted.

But that was exactly why it wasn't a good idea to let him realize we were cautious of him now.

"It's fine, Aisha," I said. "I'm sure he just wants to talk."

"Sire..."

"Aisha." Juna softly laid a hand on her shoulder. Then she whispered something in her ear. I couldn't hear what it was from here, but knowing Juna it was likely, "Let's leave this to His Majesty." She was persuading her for me.

Though reluctant, Aisha backed down. "...I understand. Madam Naden, I ask you do everything you can to take care of His Majesty."

"We're leaving His Majesty in your care, Naden," Juna agreed.

"Roger that, Aisha, Juna."

Then Naden took on her ryuu form, revealing that massive body in front of Fuuga.

In her ryuu form, Naden was about thirty meters long, so even with her feet on the ground, she was bigger than Durga.

Looking up, Fuuga let out a whistle of admiration. "Whew... She's big! I thought it seeing her at a distance, but she really makes an impact up close like this! Is she strong, like I thought?"

“I am,” Naden said in an intense tone. “So if you’re intending to harm Souma, I won’t hold back.”

Fuuga laughed the threat off. “She speaks directly inside your head? I thought she looked weird, but I guess she’s like the dragons I’ve heard of that way. I get it, dragon girl! If I act strangely, you can crush me with those big jaws of yours!”

I could only be amazed by the guts it took Fuuga to say that without any fear when faced with a ryuu. Did this man know no fear?

Naden looked at him with her golden ryuu eyes. “I’ll do just that,” she said in a grave tone.

Durga may have become cautious about the sudden appearance of a ryuu, because he was emitting a low roar. Somehow we had ended up with the looming potential of a dragon vs. tiger showdown.

In order to change the general atmosphere, I clapped my hands. “So, we were going to talk, right? Let’s get going.”

I hopped on Naden’s back, and we danced up into the sky. Fuuga and Durga raced after us.

Naden swam through the air, and Durga leapt through the sky, the dragon and tiger moving through the skies of Wedan side by side. We climbed high up, so we could see the Dabicon River, the border between the Union of Eastern Nations and the Demon Lord’s Domain.

That was when it happened.

“Hey, Souma. How does this country, the Union of Eastern Nations, look in your eyes?” Fuuga suddenly asked.

“...What do you mean?”

“I mean, don’t you think it’s hopeless? In an area with all these small and medium-sized countries, they’ve had a history of repeated unification and rifts, alliances and betrayals. Just like my country on the steppes. On top of that, because of all these messy marital alliances, they’re all hopelessly intertwined. When you’ve got relatives all over the place, no one is going to get serious about unifying the country.”

Fuuga practically spat those words out. Then he sat cross-legged on Durga’s back, resting his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands.

Those eyes which looked down on the land below were thoroughly cold. It was as if he were regarding the country itself with scorn.

“They finally managed to bring it together in the Union of Eastern

Nations, but it hasn't fundamentally changed at all. Look at this demon wave. If we'd united to fight as one, it would have ended more easily, but when each country's self-preservation and self-interest get involved, we can't work together. If the forces of the Kingdom of Friedonia hadn't come to relieve us, it would have taken longer to wipe them all out, and maybe even some of the medium-sized countries would have fallen. That's why I'm grateful to you."

"You're being awfully forthright about that," I said, surprised. I had never expected words of thanks from Fuuga.

However, thinking back, Fuuga's actions had shown a tendency to be true to his feelings. Because he was forthright, he didn't show fear in the face of other kings, and he could be straight about his affection for Madam Mutsumi. The forthrightness must have come from a strength that let him not be concerned about how others saw him.

While I was reflecting on that, Fuuga grinned. "If you people hadn't turned up, who knows how long this battle for Wedan would have dragged on? Everyone was just fighting on their own, greedy for the potential rewards to go to themselves."

"Don't act like you weren't involved," I said. "That included you, too, didn't it?"

"It's fine when I do it. Even if I do whatever I want, I still contribute the most."

"It's all in how you put it, I guess..."

But the fact was, he was right. Even if he did whatever he wanted, Fuuga got results.

Still, if others acted the way he did, there was no guarantee things would go the same for them. Fuuga's results were largely a product of his inborn aptitude.

Come to think of it... the men who'd picked a fight with Tomoe had been hurt, too. These were people who, judging by the size of their attitudes, were reasonably high-ranking figures in their country getting injured. Normally, they wouldn't need to go out on the front lines that often. Could this have been Fuuga's influence, too?

Perhaps the commanders from other countries had been pulled in by Fuuga, acting recklessly to get results like he did. Then, because they couldn't do it like him, they'd gotten badly hurt, or even died.

Could it be that many commanders from the petty states had died or been

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injured in this series of battles?

When that thought occurred to me, a chill ran down my spine. For the umpteenth time, I felt the wariness of something I couldn't identify welling up again.

With no way to know what I was thinking, Fuuga carried on talking. "So, on that note, I had a thought during this demon wave. The Union of Eastern Nations has to be united in the true sense of the word. Like when my old man conquered the steppes."

Fuuga clenched the hand he had stretched out in front of him into a tight fist.

"In a time when we have the Demon Lord's Domain to our north, the Union of Eastern Nations can't do anything as it is. Even as the empress they call a saint waves the flag to bring the nations of mankind together in the west, and a young king rebuilds a decrepit old country into a new powerhouse, the union can do nothing. We can't even stand upon the stage of this era. That's galling to the people who live in this land."

I listened silently.

The stage of this era... Did Fuuga want to rise up on to it?

What role did he intend to play there? Who was he trying to become?

"That's exactly why someone has to truly unite it." Fuuga stood on Durga's back and spread his arms wide. "To unite the Union of Eastern Nations. It will take the resolve to smash everything first so it can happen. Like I said, this country is hopelessly intertwined by alliances and blood relations. To unify it, all of that must be destroyed, cut off, and returned to a blank slate. It will take the resolve to do it no matter what the means, and no matter how much blood must be shed."

"Are you saying you'll do that, Fuuga?" I asked with a tense expression.

Fuuga thumped his chest with one hand. "Yeah! In this day and age, who else but me can?! The fact is, I've already done it on the steppe. My father brought the steppes together as one, but I made those people who still conspired to kill him submit to me as a warrior. Now, everyone on the steppe has high hopes for me."

Conspiring to kill his father. The report from the Black Cats hadn't been able to determine whether Fuuga's father, Raiga Haan, had been killed by illness or poison, but... it seemed Fuuga interpreted it as an assassination.

"Look at the times we're in. 'Strength' can be just as powerful a banner as

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the ‘ideals’ the saint carries.”

Then Fuuga pointed down at the ground.

“The Union of Eastern Nations is now full of refugees who escaped the north. Each country handles them in their own way, but I’m sure, under the current situation, the refugees have their reasons to be discontent in each of them. If even a small portion of the Demon Lord’s Domain could be liberated, they would see in me the hope that their homelands might be liberated, and they’d rush to my side. It’s not only the refugees who want to see the Demon Lord’s Domain liberated, either. The soldiers and farmers who want land, the merchants and craftspeople who want products, and the petty rulers who want to expand their holdings will all ride that wave.”

Fuuga went on to describe his imagined blueprint. There were parts of it that seemed unrealistic, but I had a strange premonition that Fuuga might just be able to pull it off. If people felt the way Fuuga said they would... it might well become “hope” for them.

“But will it be that simple?” I asked. “Even at its height, the Empire failed in its invasion of the Demon Lord’s Domain.”

“I know that. But there’s something I’m convinced of.”

“Something you’re convinced of?” I parroted back questioningly.

Fuuga gave me a firm nod. “They say the allied force led by the Empire wasn’t defeated by monsters, but by demons. And *the demons only exist deep inside the Demon Lord’s Domain.*”

I was shocked. The demons only existed deep inside the Demon Lord’s Domain?

“...On what basis do you say that?”

“I went into the Demon Lord’s Domain out of curiosity, but despite frequently being attacked by monsters, I never encountered a single demon. I went in pretty deep, too. That means the demons aren’t spread out over the whole of the Demon Lord’s Domain.”

“...” I was speechless. I felt as though Fuuga’s conjecture was on the mark.

Fuuga likely didn’t know, but I had already shared my theory that “Monsters are to demons as animals are to humans” with the Empire. If these demons couldn’t communicate with the monsters, they might see them as dangerous beasts, the same way as we did.

If the demons were wary of monsters, rather than dividing up their forces,

wouldn't they make large colonies to protect their children and such from attacks?

If it was true, it made sense why the allied forces led by the Empire had made good progress at first. Basically, the alliance had gone too deep into the Demon Lord's Domain, and perhaps they encountered a demon colony. Then they had attacked the monsters and demons without discriminating between them...

In other words, the extermination of harmful beasts had escalated into an all-out war.

"Urgh..." I grasped my head as I was struck by a headache.

Naden telepathically expressed her worry in a small voice. "Hold on, Souma, are you okay?"

I told her it was all right, but inside, I didn't think it was all right at all. There was too much to think about. I wanted to talk with Maria as soon as possible.

With no sign that he noticed, Fuuga went on talking. "That's why I think it's possible to retake a part of the Demon Lord's Domain. I'll use that accomplishment to get public opinion inside the union on my side, and create the opportunity for unification. I'll crush all who oppose me, force the uncooperative to submit with power, smash all the worthless bonds holding us back, and make this country one."

"You intend to do all of that yourself?"

"I said it, didn't I? If not me, who?!" Fuuga seemed full of confidence.

That incredible imagination and determination... This man was clearly in a different dimension than anyone else.

What had made this man, without question, was the tension in this country, and the wishes of the people to break free of it. He was the embodiment of people's hopes.

"Do you have any idea how much blood will flow?" I asked. "This is a path of carnage you plan to walk."

"I don't care! Life is brief. Even the long-lived races die when their time comes. Therefore, it's a man's greatest wish to accomplish something great that future generations will remember!"

...Yeah, there was no questioning it now.

This man was trying to become what Maria had rejected becoming.

He was a being that grew feeding on people's hopes, becoming something

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greater than human in the process.

He wanted to become the “great man” of this era.

Whenever an era came to a stalemate, great people would appear as if responding to the people’s wishes.

Ying Zheng of Qin (Qin Shi Huang), Oda Nobunaga, Napoleon... The great men who appeared to break out of an interminable situation were always violent in their destruction of the values held up until that time, and they tried to build a new world atop the ruins of the old. Many who were praised for their great deeds in later generations were seen as nothing more than slaughterers by the people of the time.

I saw the potential to become that sort of great man in Fuuga.

In this confused era with the Demon Lord’s Domain in the north, the people were seeking a vessel into which they could pour their hopes. I was wasting the label of “hero,” and Maria had the capacity to be a “saint.” However, we had rejected becoming something larger than human, so that vessel had not yet appeared.

But what about Fuuga? If the people looked for Fuuga to become a “great man,” wouldn’t Fuuga become one without hesitation?

Then, with the people’s hopes behind him, wouldn’t he try to become the hegemon of this era?

When I get home... I need to tell Maria.

I need to tell her to beware Fuuga Haan of the Union of Eastern Nations.

If this man truly rose, even the strongest of mankind’s nations was at risk.

And so, I myself made careful note of Fuuga Haan’s name as the person I most needed to be concerned about from now on.

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Chapter 5: Idioms Change in Meaning

That night.

There was a celebration being held in Wedan to celebrate the victory against the demon wave.

However, unlike in the Kingdom of Lastania, it wasn't a wild affair with singing and drinking.

Because the people gathered were the central figures of the Union of Eastern Nations, it was probably to be expected that no one felt much like letting loose.

On the surface, they all appeared to be praising each other and making small talk, but they were actually gathering information on the other countries.

They had come as reinforcements, so many wore armor, but it felt like I had been called to one of the nobles' nighttime gatherings. In fact, the big shots who wanted to form cordial relations with our country had been coming over to give their regards one after another, so we were already a little sick of it.

"I thought a victory party would be more fun," Naden griped from beside me, looking exhausted.

"Now, now, this is an important duty of ours, too," Aisha said, trying to console her. She was standing on the opposite side of me.

I looked over at Juna, who was also by my side. "You aren't tired, Juna?"

"I'm used to it, so I'm fine. Please, leave the *deterrence duties* to me."

I was standing arm-in-arm with Juna, who wore a blue dress she said she had received from Excel. And with Naden in her black dress and Aisha in a cocktail dress also next to me, I was here at this party with an iron wall. By showing off that I already had them as my partners, they were acting to deter the heads of other countries from bringing up talk of marriage with me.

We were sort of the largest of all the countries gathered here, so few would go so far as to risk offending our future queens by bringing up that subject. Especially in the presence of Juna, a woman who was beautiful and

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brimming with feminine charm.

Over and over, I'd seen lords who might bring up the subject take one look at her, decide it was hopeless, and dodge the issue with idle banter before beating a hasty retreat.

"They keep saying, 'What a lovely bunch of ladies' about us," Juna said with a smile.

"They must have had trouble coming up with any other subject on the spur of the moment," I said. "Well, given they were able to see how lovely you look in that dress, Juna, I'm sure that was enough."

"Hee hee, I love it when you compliment me, sire."

"Hold on, Souma! Could you actually look at us, too?!" Naden protested.

"I feel as though it's been some time since I've dressed this way, too," Aisha agreed.

"Naden, Aisha, you both look very lovely, too," I told them.

They both smiled in satisfaction.

By the way, Naden's dress was the black one made of her own scales that she'd worn when we'd danced in the Star Dragon Mountain Range, and Aisha's cocktail dress was the one she'd worn as a presenter on the Jewel Voice Broadcast. I'd had her pack it just in case.

Then Naden pulled at the hem of her dress, letting out a sigh as she did. "It's exhausting dressing like this, though, you know? Every time someone comes, I have to be on edge."

"You can rest, you know, Madam Naden," Aisha said, looking concerned. "I am more than capable of protecting His Majesty by myself."

"I don't want to." Naden rejected the offer. "If I do, the people here will only recognize you and Juna as Souma's partners. I'm his partner, too, okay?"

Then Naden hugged my arm tight.

Maybe that was what instigated Juna to tighten her grip and squish herself against my arm...

Don't think too much about the difference in wording there.

Feeling a little peeved, Aisha said, "It's not fair that only you two get to nuzzle up to him! If it's a nuisance, please leave the task to me! Lady Liscia has asked me to take care of His Majesty."

"I've been asked to do the same!" Naden shot back. "Besides, a dragon and her knight are of one body, one mind!"

“Madam Naden, you do realize you are not a dragon, and His Majesty is not a knight, yes?”

Fireworks flew between the two of them. I had to worry about how this looked to those around us, so maybe it was time to stop them.

“Um, you two, you don’t need to compete over this...”

“”Please be quiet, Souma/sire!””

“Uh, sure...”

While I was being intimidated by the two of them, Yuriga looked exasperated. “Are you really a king?”

That reminded me that Tomoe, Ichiha, and Yuriga, the three kids, were here, too.

She’d caught us in the middle of an embarrassing scene, so I tried to change the subject by asking, “Don’t you need to be with your brother, Fuuga?”

“Even if I were with my brother, it’s all adult men there. It’s boring. I’d prefer to stay here with Tomoe and Ichiha.”

“Mrrgh,” Tomoe muttered. “Don’t you have any friends, Yuriga?”

Yuriga’s face froze.

Oh... She’d hit the nail on the head.

With a clearly pasted on smile, Yuriga reached out for Tomoe’s face and pinched her cheeks. “Wh-What exactly do you think you’re saying?! You squirt.”

“Hyau?! Hyohhyoh, hyahehehyoh.”

“P-Please, stop that, Yuriga.” Ichiha hastily got in between them and peeled them apart.

Yuriga crossed her arms and looked away peevishly with her cheeks puffed up in anger. It only made her look like she was trying to act tough.

“It’s fine! No one sees me as anything other than my brother’s little sister! The adults are always watching to see how my brother will react and kissing up to him, too!”

...Oh, now it made sense.

For this girl, Fuuga was a source of pride, but she also had a complex about him.

In a group of siblings, if one was especially talented, it was only natural such feelings would arise. It sounded like Ichiha had been looked down upon compared to his capable brothers and sisters, too.

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For Yuriga in particular, she was at a sensitive age, so maybe her usual prickly attitude was the other side of those feelings.

In other words...

“You’re being spoiled by Tomoe because she pays attention to you, huh,” I commented.

“Who’d you say’s being spoiled by this little squirt?!”

“Y-You wanted me to spoil you?” Tomoe asked gingerly. “Should I pat you on the head?”

“Wahhhh, you don’t have to do that!”

The children went on making a ruckus.

Yuriga would never admit it, but I felt like Tomoe and Ichiha were bringing out the closest thing to her true personality. These three might make better friends than I would have thought.

As I was reflecting on that, the time came.

“Ahem! Ladies and gentlemen. I know we are in the middle of our banquet, but could I ask you to listen to me for a moment?”

Duke Chima was standing on a platform prepared for the occasion.

Behind him, six young men and women stood in a line. Mutsumi was one of them.

“Now then, as I have promised before, I will announce the countries to which my children will be sent as a show of gratitude for dispatching reinforcements,” Duke Chima announced loudly from the platform.

That presumably meant the six up on the stage were the six Chima brothers and sisters who were included in the reward. The six excluded the eldest of the siblings, who was the heir, and Ichiha, the youngest brother.

If I recalled, they were:

Nata (Age 22) — Second Son: Muscular man who wielded a giant ax.

Mutsumi (Age 20) — Eldest Daughter: Beautiful, with excellent martial abilities and ingenuity.

Gauche (Age 18) — Third Son: The best archer in the world.

Yomi (Age 17) — Second Daughter: Elder twin sister, avid reader with a wealth of knowledge.

Sami (Age 17) — Third Daughter: Younger twin sister, with a gift for accounting and a talent for mental arithmetic.

Nike (Age 16) — Fourth Son: Beautiful boy, whose spear moved faster

than the eye could follow.

Being from the same family as Madam Mutsumi and Ichiha, they were all beautiful.

On top of that, each had a superior talent, so I could understand why all these countries wanted them as brides, or grooms, or retainers. I could understand, but... even so, there was no person among them that I desperately wanted for myself. No, not among *them.*

Well, having been the last to get here, it had little to do with us.

Or so I thought, but... I felt like I'd suddenly made eye contact with Duke Chima up on the platform. I had a bad feeling about this, and it quickly proved to be true.

Duke Chima looked at me as he said, "In regards to the selection process, I would like the countries to choose in the order of largest contribution. Thus, the one whose country had the largest force, and slew the most monsters, must be this gentleman here. The King of Friedonia, Sir Souma Kazuya!"

The moment he said that, all eyes focused on us.

Their glances were a mix of resignation, interest, and envy. I had effectively come last only to take the best part, so that may have been to be expected.

Aw, damn it... He just had to do this...

I was sure Duke Chima wanted a link to a prominent country, no matter what it took.

Naturally, as the most powerful country here, he was going to want a line of contact with us. That was probably why he'd given us first place.

For my part, I wanted to avoid standing out here, and to quietly achieve my *objective* afterward, but now he'd made it a hassle.

Then I felt an especially sharp pair of eyes on me.

Wha?!

Juna and Naden let go of the arms they were wrapped around, and Aisha positioned herself so as to protect me from that stare.

When I looked past Aisha in the direction I had felt it from, there was Fuuga.

He was looking straight at me with no expression. Those eyes said, *If you're planning to choose Young Miss Mutsumi, be prepared.*

If I were to tease him by saying I wanted Madam Mutsumi now, Fuuga

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would probably decide I was an enemy.

In *The Prince,* Machiavelli said people will soon forget injuries against themselves, but they will never forget injury to their property or women.

If I did something like steal Madam Mutsumi, Fuuga would no doubt come to steal her back, even if it meant war with the Kingdom of Friedonia. Like King Agamemnon, invading and destroying Troy to take back his younger brother's beautiful wife, Helen.

I have no intent of creating a source of strife with Fuuga, but...

Was that man this true to his desires?

If he wanted something, he'd do anything to attain it. That position was terrifying.

I turned to Duke Chima and bowed a little before silently shaking my head.

"It's a kind offer, but I'll have to decline."

"S-Say what?!"

"We of the Kingdom of Friedonia were late to arrive, and our contributions are not equal to those who have fought long and hard here. I ask you to please give the reward to somebody else."

When I said that, a clear feeling of relief flowed through the room.

That was because the number of slots for rewards hadn't decreased, I'm sure. From here and there, I heard things like...

"A wonderful show of consideration."

"It seems the new King of Friedonia is sensible."

"What an upstanding man he is."

...and other compliments.

Just how serious were they, I wonder?

After I stepped aside, first place became Fuuga of Malmkhitan, so it seemed Fuuga would be able to attain Madam Mutsumi, whom he desired.

Fuuga rose to the platform and suddenly swept Madam Mutsumi up in his arms, carrying her like a princess. "I won't make you do anything bothersome like say I want you as a retainer. Mutsumi, I've been in love since I first laid eyes on you. Be my wife."

Up on stage, and with central figures from many other countries watching him, he gave her a straightforward proposal.

It made Madam Mutsumi's eyes go wide, but she quickly wrapped her lithe arms around Fuuga's neck.

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“Hee hee, you’re wonderful. I’ll do it. I do like strong people.”

“Yeah! I swear, if it’s for you, I’ll never lose to anyone!”

“I believe you, Lord Fuuga.”

Together with applause for the two of them, there were looks that were half congratulatory and half jealous.

No, more of them are jealous, I think.

That was just how many people had been after Madam Mutsumi.

Fuuga clearly didn’t care in the slightest about any of the looks. I guess that was Fuuga for you. Anyway, I was glad not to have created undue strife with him.

While I was feeling relieved, I noticed Yuriga staring at me.

“...Is something wrong?”

“Why did you turn down first place? You could have been the one to take Mutsumi!”

That wasn’t just curiosity in her eyes; it looked like she seriously wanted to know.

“Could it be because my brother was after Mutsumi?” she demanded.

“It’s like I said before, but... that might be part of it, too. I don’t want to fight Fuuga.”

“I see. You’re afraid of my brother.”

When she said that, the look in Yuriga’s eyes was a little sharp. What had brought that on?

Then, in a quiet voice, Yuriga began to talk.

“We know how incredible my brother is. But that’s not always true of others. In the Union of Eastern Nations, there are those who underestimate him as a minor king from the steppes.”

Well, Malmkhitan was still a small country in terms of territory, after all. If I said that, I, the ruler of the Kingdom of Friedonia, was afraid of the king of a small country like Fuuga, they’d laugh that I was being too timid.

Yuriga, however, never laughed. “But... you aren’t like that, I see. Even though you rule a kingdom that is incomparably larger than the steppes of Malmkhitan, you’re as cautious of my brother as you should be.”

“No, that’s...”

“I see why my brother took notice of you now. I understand why you’re protected by so many people, too.” Yuriga smiled faintly.

When a girl of thirteen smiled as if she saw right through me, it gave me a

bit of a shock. Though it was in a different way from her brother, this girl might not be normal, either.

While we were talking, the distribution of rewards ended.

"With this, the places my children will be going have been decided," Duke Chima said. "Everyone, I truly..."

"Ah! A moment, if I may?"

With Duke Chima about to give his closing remarks, I decided now was the time to strike and cut him off.

"Um, are you dissatisfied regarding the matter of the reward, perhaps?" Duke Chima asked, his eyes wide.

I hurriedly shook my head. "Oh, no, no. This isn't about the reward. You have another child named Sir Ichiha Chima, yes, Sir Mathew? The youngest one."

"Wh-Why, yes. He's right there, in fact..."

As Duke Chima said, Ichiha was at my side.

I put my hand down on Ichiha's head, and said to Duke Chima, "From the looks of it, he's become fast friends with my little sister. I also hear that all the boys and girls of the Chima family are excellent, so I believe this boy has potential, too. That being the case, how about it? I'd like you to leave Sir Ichiha in the care of our country so that he can be educated."

"M-My word..." The suddenness of the proposal left Duke Chima flummoxed.

In his head he was probably working out my intent, and weighing the merits and demerits of accepting my proposal. By the way, I had gotten Ichiha's permission first before proposing this. He already seemed enthusiastic about coming to our country.

He'd felt awkward as the oddball who did nothing but draw pictures of monsters, and the person who understood him best, Madam Mutsumi, would be leaving, too, so he had nothing tying him down here.

His mother had long since passed away, so it was just a matter of whether or not Duke Chima gave permission.

Duke Chima hesitantly said, "Listen... The boy is a little eccentric, and he's physically quite weak. I don't know that he can live up to your expectations..."

"If he's physically frail, that's all the more reason he should come to our place," I said firmly. "Our country is in the middle of a medical revolution,

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and we have talented doctors. It would be good to have them look at him. Also... I'm more than fine with him being eccentric. I have a weakness for people like that." I doubled down. "I'm sure we'll have him study under Prime Minister Hakuya for a while. Then, next spring, I'm planning to have Ichiha and Tomoe go to school together."

"M-Me, go to school?!" Tomoe looked surprised.

I grinned and nodded. "Yeah. I've been talking with Hakuya about it. There's a lot you can learn from living as part of a group. Hakuya wants you to go to school and learn the things you can't learn with just a private tutor. I'm still debating whether to choose the Academy (for academic subjects) or the Officer's Academy (for military subjects), though."

"I-I'll... be going to school with Ichiha..." Tomoe was shaken up by the news, but she seemed happy. Her expression was one of confusion, but her wolf tail was wagging away, so it was easy to tell.

Then, having put his thoughts in order, Duke Chima put on his affable middle-aged man smile. "Ohh, if that's how it is, then please!"

It seemed he'd decided it would be a good thing to have a line of contact with our country.

"You're fine with this, as well, right, Ichiha?" he asked.

"Y-Yes, Father!" Ichiha nodded his head.

Relieved, I extended my right hand. "Good. Well then, Ichiha. It'll be a pleasure to have you."

"Yes. I'll be in your care."

Ichiha and I exchanged a firm handshake.

The other people gathered here looked at us as if they weren't sure just what they had witnessed.

They were likely befuddled by the fact that the King of Friedonia, who they thought had turned down the prize, had obtained the youngest brother, who hadn't been included in it.

However, the youngest brother of the Chimas was famous for being an oddball, so no one raised an objection to it. In fact...

"He led in all those troops, and all he got for it was the youngest brother. It's hardly worth the bother."

There were even those who blatantly mocked Ichiha like that. It was probably in attempt to praise me, but I found it distasteful they felt they had to belittle Ichiha to do it.

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Well, there was no need to explain what made Ichiha so valuable to people like that, so I just gave them a polite smile and left it at that.

As Ichiha looked down in response to the harsh words, I put a hand on his head and said in a voice only he could hear, “Let them say what they please. You were all I wanted from the very beginning.”

“Souma...”

I grinned. “If you had been included in the reward to begin with, I’m sure I’d have chosen you without giving up my position as the greatest contributor. Even if that meant coming into conflict with Fuuga.”

Ichiha finally smiled a little for me.

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Elfrieden Historical Idiom Lessons: Number 6

“To Gain the Youngest Brother of House Chima”

Type: Proverb
Meaning:

1. To gain little in exchange for a lot of hard work.
2. For the thing everyone left behind to actually be an incredible treasure.

Origin: This idiom has meant different things at different times. At first, it was said with meaning (1). It comes from Souma, who led reinforcements to the Union of Eastern Nations and then brought back Ichiha Chima, who was then thought to be without talent, as his prize. However, as the hidden potential of Ichiha Chima blossomed, it took on meaning (2), which was the opposite.

Equivalent Expressions:

1. “Great pains all in vain.”
2. “There is fortune to be found in that which others leave behind.”

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Chapter 6: A Troublesome Present

About two days had passed since the celebration.

We had managed to sweep the monsters from this land, but we were going to remain until we learned the current state of the demon wave.

And so, two days later, the situation in each country became clear.

According to reports from the Black Cats, with the destruction of the monsters gathered in the Duchy of Chima, the number of monsters attacking all countries had fallen noticeably. They felt that the United Forces of the Union of Eastern Nations could handle the rest, meaning we were no longer needed here.

While we were packing up the Friedonian National Defense Force's camps to withdraw, I heard a voice.

"Hey! Souma. Heading home already?" Fuuga suddenly rode up to us on Durga the flying tiger.

"Fuuga?" I asked, surprised.

His sudden appearance made Aisha wary, but the man had Mutsumi behind him and Yuriga in front of his saddle, so he probably wasn't here to stir up trouble.

"You look like you're in a hurry," Fuuga commented, looking at the soldiers busily running around. With an easy jump down from Durga's back, he helped Mutsumi and Yuriga down as well, and asked, "Couldn't you have taken things a little slower?"

"Not an option, I'm afraid. We can't be away from the country for too long. Just keeping a force this large here incurs massive expenses, and with the demon wave handled, I want to hurry back home."

The Union of Eastern Nations didn't have as many paved roads as the kingdom, so we couldn't use methods like the rhinosaurus train for shipping. We would have to take the long, slow way home, so I wanted to set off quickly.

Hakuya had told me to hurry back as soon as our business was done, for one thing. Besides, Liscia was due soon, so I had personal reasons to hurry

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back, as well.

Madam Mutsumi walked forward and bowed her head to me. “Sir Souma, thank you very much for the reinforcements you brought us.”

“I already said this last night, but all we did was show up at the end to wipe out the remaining enemies. There’s no need for excessive thanks.”

“Even so, it’s a fact that you saved this country.” Mutsumi raised her face and smiled. “I’d also like to ask you to take good care of Ichiha. He’s mature for his age, but he’s weak and timid, so I’m a little worried about him.”

“Ha ha, I’m sure he’ll be fine. I know how mature he is from talking to him, and he seems to be on good terms with my little sister, too, so I think he’ll be fine.”

With that, I looked in the direction of the three kids, Tomoe, Ichiha, and Yuriga, who were saying their goodbyes.

“Bye now, Yuriga,” said Tomoe.

“Take care, Yuriga,” Ichiha added.

“Oh... Yeah...”

Huh? Tomoe and Ichiha were acting normal, but Yuriga seemed a little quiet. She didn’t have her usual strong personality.

Even so, she crossed her arms and arched her back so her chest stuck out, as if she were trying to put on a show of being the older one despite that.

“Well... It wasn’t so bad being with you two. It felt like I’d gained a little brother and sister. You keep doing your best when you get back to the kingdom.”

“A little brother...?” Ichiha murmured.

“Could it be you’re feeling lonely, Yuriga?” Tomoe asked straight-out.

Yuriga’s face turned a bright red. “Wh-Who’s lonely?! You’re acting too cheeky, kid!” (Pinch.)

“I shaid, don’t pinsh my cheeksh like that!”

“Yuriga, the way you’re acting is like a lonely kid throwing a tantrum, you know?” Ichiha pointed out.

“Shove off! I’ll pinch yours, too!”

“Ow... Let’s run, Ichiha!”

“R-Right!”

Breaking free from Yuriga’s hands, Tomoe took Ichiha’s hand and ran off.

Yuriga chased after them, shouting, “Wait!”

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The three shouted and made a ruckus as they ran around inside the main camp. If they'd been fighting, I would have stopped it, but Tomoe seemed to be laughing and having fun, so it was probably fine.

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...Hold on, was Tomoe having fun by teasing Yuriga about being so direct with her emotions?

Maybe when Tomoe grew up she was going to be the same sort of devilish beauty that Juna was. I felt like I could see hints of it already.

While I was feeling newfound worry for our beloved younger sister's future (though I questioned whether it was fair to look at it like that), Fuuga suddenly clapped his hands as if he'd just remembered something.

"Ohh, Yuriga just reminded me. Hey, Souma."

"What is it?"

"I wanted to ask, can I leave Yuriga with you in the kingdom?"

""Huh?!"" Yuriga and I cried out in simultaneous surprise.

What was this guy saying, out of nowhere?

"Wh-What are you saying so suddenly, Big Brother?!" Yuriga exclaimed. "Sending me to the kingdom...!"

It seemed Yuriga shared my opinion...

Wait, even Yuriga, the one most affected, was only hearing this now?

Seriously, what was he thinking?

"What are your intentions?" I asked slowly.

"You were talking about sticking your pipsqueak and the pipsqueak who's going to be my brother-in-law in school, right? When I heard that, it made me want to put Yuriga in a large school, too. We don't have those sorts of facilities in Malmkhitan, you see."

"Big Brother! I can read, write, and do arithmetic! If you say you want me to study more at this point, I would rather it be at your side learning to become a commander who can help you!"

Fuuga put a hand down on her head. "Your potential as a commander isn't bad. But that's all it is, and you'll reach your limits quickly if you only learn to be a warrior. Fortunately, your head isn't half bad, either. If you amass knowledge and become a wise general, or an internal administrator, I think you can be a great success."

"B-But..."

"Besides, I'm going to be getting busy. I'll be welcoming Mutsumi as my bride, after all. Even if you stayed in Malmkhitan, I wouldn't have the same time for you as before. So, why not go to the Kingdom of Friedonia with your fighting buddies? Come back to me someday as someone who can help realize my dream."

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Yuriga glanced toward Tomoe and Ichiha.

She must have been wondering whether to stay with Fuuga, who she would have less time with, or go to the kingdom and attend school with Tomoe and Ichiha.

Yuriga thought about it in silence for a while, but ultimately she nodded. “I understand. I will learn in the kingdom, and make sure I become a person who can help you!”

Then she clenched her fists in determination.

Wait, hold on! Why were they moving this discussion along without any input from us?!

“I haven’t said we’ll take her yet, you realize?” I pointed out.

“Well, do me a favor,” Fuuga said, throwing his arm around my shoulder.

This position... it was scary because, with Fuuga’s strength, he could easily strangle me to death.

Even Fuuga was unlikely to do anything to me with the strongest warriors in the kingdom all here, mind you, but...

I mean, he wouldn’t, right?

It was a bit scary, so I wanted him to let go.

When I looked, Aisha had her hand on the hilt of her greatsword, and Juna already had a throwing knife in hand ready to go, while Naden’s hair was standing on end.

They were expressing that if he did anything funny, they would slash, or throw at, or shock him.

Fuuga whispered in my ear, “Well, obviously... this isn’t just about Yuriga studying.”

I whispered back, “She’s your precious sister, right? What are you thinking, leaving her with us?”

“I’m doing it *because* she’s my precious sister.” Fuuga gave a crooked smile that showed off his fang-like teeth. “There’s about to be a lot of movement in my country. Internally, I plan to exterminate the hostile races remaining in Malmkhitan, while externally I intend to head into the Demon Lord’s Domain with support from the countries of the Union of Eastern Nations. In that process, I expect things to get wild, if only temporarily.”

“...You’re serious about that.”

“Of course. I don’t say things I’m not prepared to make a reality.”

With the understanding that the demons were only deep inside the Demon

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Lord's Domain, he would march in there with only the people from his own country. Was he truly trying to carry out what he had spoken of that day?

Then Fuuga suddenly smiled. "There's a risk of my relatives being targeted at that point. Mutsumi has the wits and power to defend herself, but Yuriga is still little. There could be people who'd try to abduct her to use as a hostage. When I consider the worst outcomes, I think it would be best to leave her far away, in the Kingdom of Friedonia."

"I see... Does Madam Mutsumi know about this?"

"Sure. Mutsumi agreed with me."

When I looked in Madam Mutsumi's direction, she gave me a slight nod.

Take care of my sister-in-law, Yuriga. Was that what it was supposed to mean?

If she approved of what Fuuga was doing here, that meant she knew he was about to embark on a huge gamble. Even knowing she faced danger herself, she was choosing to follow Fuuga down his path of conquest. I saw something that overlapped with Liscia in her eyes.

"You've found a good wife," I said. "Don't do too much to make her sad, okay?"

"I can't make any promises, but I'll do my best. I'll definitely protect Mutsumi. I have to show her *my world,* like I promised to."

They'd talked about that, huh...

I see. Like Liscia had bet on me, Madam Mutsumi had done the same with Fuuga.

They had bet their own futures.

I let out a sigh of admiration for them as I said to Fuuga, "I understand the situation, but are you sure this is all right? You haven't considered that I might take Yuriga hostage?"

"You'd never lay a hand on Yuriga." With the eyes of a large predator, Fuuga smirked. "I don't really understand you. You're not strong, yet you have many followers. You have tens of thousands of men at your command, yet you are not trying to do anything."

I was silent.

"Even if you outnumbered me five-to-one, I don't think I could lose. But if it came to a fight, I feel like it would become a quagmire. Like it would turn into an annoying battle. That's my prediction. I think, if possible, I'd rather not fight you. You feel something similar about me, don't you?"

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"...Well, yeah," I nodded. "In my case, it's not 'if possible,' though. I absolutely don't want to fight you."

If he was going to be so open about it, I couldn't dodge the issue.

Fuuga slapped his belly as if to say, *I knew it!* "It's an honor to have the king of a great country so wary of me. So, given that you don't want to oppose me, you would never lay a hand on Yuriga and incur my wrath. If anything, you'd go out of your way to defend her properly, wouldn't you?"

He was right, so I couldn't deny it.

If we took Yuriga into our care in the kingdom, I was sure I'd monitor her to keep her from learning anything confidential, but I would give her maximum protection.

"So? What do we gain holding onto Yuriga for you?" I asked.

"I'll owe you one."

"If the need arises, you won't hesitate to back out on any obligation or duty, will you?"

I said it nastily, but Fuuga responded with a jolly laugh.

"I won't deny it. But Yuriga is my only remaining relative with the exception of Mutsumi, who's becoming my wife. I wouldn't go out of my way to start trouble with the country where she's staying."

"I don't know if I should believe that..."

This being Fuuga, I couldn't be overconfident. Still, it was probably true that I could expect her to be a somewhat effective deterrent. It was a card it was better to have than not, that was all, but it was not bad to have something prepared to deal with Fuuga, no matter how insignificant.

"...Okay," I said. "We'll take Yuriga in."

"Ha ha ha, it's a big help." Fuuga released the arm around my shoulder.

When Fuuga moved away, Aisha, Juna, and Naden stood down, too. I was glad we'd ended that without a clash.

Putting a hand on top of Yuriga's head, Fuuga said, "Everything's sorted out. Go to the kingdom and study hard."

"I will! I'll do my best, Big Brother!" Yuriga said with spirit.

With another smirk, Fuuga approached me again and said in a quiet voice, "I know I said you'd never lay a hand on Yuriga, but if you want to lay a hand on her sexually, I don't mind, you know?"

"Huh?! What are you saying?!"

Yuriga was what, thirteen? There was no way I was touching that.

However, Fuuga laughed in amusement. “No, no, I’m not saying you’d do it right now. I expect to leave Yuriga with you until she graduates school. I’m sure several years from now she’ll be beautiful, so maybe you’re going to want to have a go at her?”

“As if!” I snapped.

“Well, if you do, I’ll see to it that you marry her properly. That would make you my brother-in-law. I’ll see to it you pay me respect as your older brother.”

“...I want no part of that.”

Being Fuuga’s brother-in-law? Count me out. I’d be in for as much trouble as Azai Nagamasa had with Nobunaga.

Then Fuuga slapped me in the back. “Well, anyway, I’m leaving Yuriga in your hands.”

“Ow... Fine.”

I figured the brother-in-law talk was just a joke, but it was scary that I didn’t know how serious he was about it.

And so, having had a troublesome present thrust upon us at the last moment, we set out on our return to the kingdom where Liscia was waiting.

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Chapter 7: The State of Various Countries

— One day in the 1st month, 1,547th year, Continental Calendar, in the Northeast of the Kingdom —

It happened while Souma was still in the Union of Eastern Nations.

In the east of the kingdom, the National Naval Defense Force under the command of Castor was engaged in patrol duties. As they advanced not in the top secret island-type carrier, but in five of the traditional sea dragon pulled iron battleships, Castor's ship received a report.

That message, delivered by a messenger kui trained specially for naval use, informed him of a clash between the kingdom's fisherman and fishermen from the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union who had been fishing in the kingdom's waters illegally.

What was more, there were armed ships on the side of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union, and their attacks had forced the kingdom's fishermen to retreat.

When Castor received the report, he immediately headed for the point where the clash was said to have occurred.

From his seat in the captain's chair, Castor glared in irritation at the sea ahead.

These clashes have become more frequent lately. We've only had people wounded so far, but sooner or later, someone is going to die. Once that happens, there's no stopping it. It's a cycle of hatred. Do these Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago guys plan to kick off a war?

Even if it came to war, Castor thought the kingdom would win.

It was true that a naval conflict played to the advantages of a maritime state like the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union, but the kingdom had their secret weapon, the wyvern-bearing island-type carrier, Hiryuu.

The Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union would probably not be able to respond immediately to a weapon which went against the common sense

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of this world, which said that wyvern cavalry couldn't be used at sea because wyverns feared going far enough out that they couldn't see the land.

Besides, on that island they had secretly built into a carrier, his former vassals who were now the wyvern cavalry were engaged in intense training to improve themselves to this very day. He couldn't see them losing to anyone.

Still, if we can avoid fighting, that's for the best.

Even if he was confident they could win, nothing in war was absolute. The unexpected could happen.

Besides, they had just fought a war with the corrupt nobles and the Principality of Amidonia last year, and they were dispatching reinforcements to the Union of Eastern Nations now. Frequent military campaigns would exhaust the country.

Well, not that I'm in a position to talk...

Though it was the product of many different intentions and situations intertwining, Castor felt a heavy sense of responsibility for having opposed Souma last year. He resolved to work himself to the bone for this country this time.

He imagined what a war with the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago would be like. *Wars at sea aren't like wars on land.*

In the war with Amidonia, their aim had only been to take one city, so it had been possible to end it in a short period of time. But an all-out war with the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago would be troublesome.

There may be routes in the sea, but there's no land. With a single naval battle, we can gain superiority in maritime trade, but unless we take the land where their ports and docks are, the enemy fleet can recover as many times as they have to. That said, it would be difficult to make an agglomeration of island countries, like the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, fully submit.

Even if they took an island, maintaining it would be difficult. Those islands were separated from the Kingdom of Friedonia by the sea, and he'd heard lifestyles on each island were drastically different from in the kingdom, of course, but even from each other. It would be difficult to put a magistrate in place to administer them.

Just winning's not going to be enough, yeah. Honestly... When I was fighting in the air, brute force was everything, but there's just too much holding us back on land.

Castor let out an exasperated sigh.

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In the past, Castor would have been excited just at the chance to fight, but now he was thinking about what would happen after the war, too.

This was proof of his growth since losing to Souma and being properly reeducated by Excel, but he probably didn't realize it himself.

"Captain, that is our destination."

When his second-in-command told him that, Castor squinted.

He saw a fleet of about ten fishing vessels and medium-sized armed vessels deployed as if to protect them. As if to work himself up, Castor adjusted his captain's hat.

"Okay. Today's the day we find out what they're up to. Send a message to all ships. 'Ignore the fishing vessels; focus on capturing the armed ships.'"

If things followed the usual pattern, the illegal fishing fleet would flee the moment the National Naval Defense Force showed up. Then, in order to let them escape, the faster medium-sized armed ships would rapidly close in on them for a hit-and-run style attack to confuse the National Naval Defense Force before fending off pursuing attacks.

The medium-sized armed ships of the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago were made of wood, and instead of sea dragons, they were drawn by horned doldons, which were creatures that were like dolphins with a unicorn-like horn attached.

These horned doldons might not have the same pulling power, but their swimming speed and maneuverability far outstripped that of sea dragons.

For that reason, in a moving battle, the National Naval Defense Force was unable to capture the armed vessels.

Castor was well aware of that fact.

"I've gotten used to how they move," Castor announced. "There's no need to match their speed! Do not change heading, but remain fixed on the direction the fishing ships fled! Prepare for bombardment!"

"But Captain!" his second-in-commander protested. "If we simply fire as we pursue another target, I believe it will be difficult to hit an enemy with their maneuverability!"

Castor shook his head. "There's no real need to hit them. We'll see how they move, and fire where they're likely to go. I'm sure they won't go anywhere that's already being bombarded. When we've naturally placed restrictions on their course, we can kill their mobility."

"I see. Roger."

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As expected, the three armed ships moved to shield the fishing ships, closing in toward Castor's fleet.

The National Naval Defense Force fleet followed Castor's orders, deliberately not targeting the armed ships and firing where they were likely to go.

Boom... Splash! Boom... Splash!

There was the repeated sound of cannonballs firing, and then them impacting the surface of the sea and raising a pillar of water.

Though the armed ships kept trying to use their maneuverability to make fools of them, with the cannonballs and pillars of water, their courses were blocked and they couldn't move around well.

Castor watched calmly from beyond the brim of his captain's hat. "I more or less have it figured out."

"Huh?"

"Artillery! Direction: two o'clock! Distance: eighty!"

When Castor yelled into the speaking tube, the artillery fire began as commanded.

Boom... Crunch!

There was a hit on the prow of one of the armed ships that had been trying to turn while avoiding the cannonballs and pillars of water.

It tore the front off the boat, severing the reins that bound it to the horned doldon, and the now-free horned doldon swam off to the east.

"Target struck! Medium damage to enemy ship!" Seeing the incredible hit, Castor's second-in-command looked at Castor with surprise. "Th-That was magnificent. I'm impressed that you could hit it..."

"When I was in the Air Force, we had to calculate the wind currents so that explosive barrels we dropped would hit their targets. This is a cinch for me."

Castor made it sound easy, but it went without saying that this was an insanely advanced skill. It was the product of his experience as General of the Air Force and his training in the navy.

While the second-in-command was exasperated, the remaining two ships

gave up on any further distraction as too difficult and began to withdraw.

The ship with its prow damaged was listing heavily and beginning to sink, but they must have decided rescuing them was too dangerous with the National Defense Force here.

They cut loose a meager number of life boats into the sea and then headed off to the east.

The crew abandoned the sinking ship, swimming desperately for the life boats that had been left behind.

Confident that his opponents had no will to resist, Castor gave an order to the whole ship. “Cease hostilities. We will now go to save those thrown overboard. Every one of them is a valuable source of information. In order to find out what’s going on in the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, save as many lives as you can!”

“”””Yes, sir!”””

Then Castor’s fleet rescued all of the crew from the armed ship, loading them aboard and returning to Lagoon City.

The prisoners would likely be questioned by the National Naval Defense Force, and then Souma or Hakuya would decide what was to be done with them.

I hope we can learn something from this... Castor thought as he sat in the Captain’s chair on a ship returning to port.

◇ ◇ ◇

— At the same time, in the northwest of the kingdom —

In the mercantile district of a walled city near the border with the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State, a large woman in her mid-thirties wearing armor was walking with a slovenly man who was casually wearing the vestments of a Lunarian Orthodox priest.

They were the female general of the former Principality of Amidonia, who Souma had entrusted with preparations against the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State, and the rotten Bishop Souji Lester who had come from the Orthodox Papal State.

When they walked through the town, people frequently came up to speak to them.

“Lady Margarita, please shake my hand.”

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“I’m always listening to you sing. You have such a lovely, powerful voice.”

“Could I ask you to pat my child on the head?”

The words Margarita received from young women were all of praise and respect.

Meanwhile, the words Souji received...

“Hey, Bishop. Why don’t you come here and join us for a drink?”

“Hey, worldly bishop, come listen to my drunken confession.”

“Hey, you, when are you going to pay for your drinks from last time? I’m not putting any more on your tab.”

Well, as you could imagine, a lot of them were from drunkards or the old lady who ran the bar.

Margarita looked at Souji with a wry smile. “You’re a popular one, aren’t you, Sir Souji?”

“Geez, that sounds nothing if not sarcastic. I only get talked to by old women and drunk old men. I’d rather be popular with the young ladies, like you.”

“Isn’t that because you show up at the bar to drink every night?”

“I don’t have anything else to do, so what’s the harm? My old haunt looks like it’s keeping quiet, after all.”

“...True enough. We’ve seen no sign of any activity.”

These two had been deployed here to prepare against the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State, but the Orthodox Papal State was showing no sign of acting, and this border was oddly quiet.

Right now, close to half of the army had been dispatched to the Union of Eastern Nations as reinforcements, and the provisional king Souma was away on top of that.

It was a prime opportunity to pull something, but the Orthodox Papal State was showing no signs of moving. That was actually more disturbing.

“There have been no reports of their forces approaching the border, after all...” Margarita crossed her arms and cocked her head to the side.

Souji let out a snorting laugh. “Well, knowing that country, they’ll incite the believers here before they move troops themselves. That’s why you, who are beloved by the people of the Amidonia Region, and I, who am an obstacle to their incitement, were sent here, but... I don’t hear anything about orders being given to the believers.”

Margarita narrowed her eyes at him. “Is it possible that you’re just not aware of it?”

Souji shrugged. “I’ve asked the drunken adherents at all the bars I go around to, but nothing. Drunks will blab about anything, you know. If nothing along those lines is coming out of their mouths, that probably means there’ve been no commands at the level of the believers.”

“I thought you were just going out and drinking, but it seems you were doing what you ought to, after all.”

Margarita sounded impressed, but Souji just cackled.

“Yeah, I’m doing my job. So maybe I can get the king to pay my tab, huh?”

“...It seems you did it half out of a desire to drink, after all.”

“No arguments here. How about it, will you drink with me tonight? I happen to like glamorous gals like you.”

He was attempting to woo her, but Margarita was having none of it. “Unfortunately, you will have to try someone else. I am married, you see.”

“Huh?! You’re married?!”

“Is that such a surprise? I’m old enough to be.”

“No, but... I’ve never heard a thing about this...”

The bold General Margarita who feared no man had a man. Souji tried to imagine what kind of hero he must be, but Margarita shyly scratched at her cheek.

“Well, I won’t disagree that my husband doesn’t have much of a presence. He was originally a bureaucrat, and he’s a bit scrawny. Now he manages my domain in Amidonia and raises the children.”

“A bureaucrat?! Wait, you have kids, too?!”

“That was why I didn’t want to wear that dress for the Kouhaku red and white song battle.”

By the way, it seemed that Margarita’s husband and children had definitely seen her sing wearing that gaudy eighteen-meter dress Roroa had made for her over the broadcast. When she had returned, they’d kindly told her, “You did great.” And Margarita’s face had looked like it might spontaneously combust.

Margarita coughed to hid her embarrassment. “What about you, Sir Souji? You’re old enough; shouldn’t you be settling down yourself? Lunarian Orthodoxy doesn’t forbid its preachers from marrying, does it?”

“Womanizing is a taboo, though.”

“You’ve already broken that one, I’m sure. Did I not hear you were living with an elf-eared girl?”

“You mean Merula? When it comes to her... she’s more like my pet.”

“That sounds even more indecent, you realize?”

“It’s like feeding a stray cat. That curveless shrimp isn’t my type at... Hm?”

In the middle of talking, Souji stopped and looked in front of them.

From the looks of it, someone was coming their way. It was a middle-aged woman wearing the robes of a Lunarian Orthodox nun.

The nun stopped in front of Souji, out of breath. “Lord Souji... W-We have trouble...”

“What happened? Why the rush?”

“F-From the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State...”

Then, stopping to catch her breath, she brought her face to Souji’s ear and whispered to him.

“The saint has come from the Orthodox Papal State incognito. She says she wants to speak with you.”

Souji and Margarita visited a Lunarian Orthodox church on the edge of town.

Having Margarita stand by outside in case something should happen, Souji opened the door and entered the holy hall.

He saw someone wearing a hooded cape that covered the whole body sitting by the altar.

When he circled around in front of that person, Souji’s eyes went wide. “Well, color me surprised. It really is the saint girl.”

“It’s been awhile, Bishop Lester.”

When that person stood up, two pigtails fell out from inside her hood.

The shape of her face was beautiful, but pale and without life. This doll-like girl was the saint of Lunarian Orthodoxy, Mary Valenti.

While feeling suspicious, Souji didn’t let it show on his face as he casually asked, “What’s a great saint doing coming to the kingdom unannounced? If you’re not careful, they’ll catch you.”

However, Mary’s face didn’t move in the slightest.

“If it happens, it happens. I’ll simply request an audience with your Sir

Souma from prison. That is the only reason I've come here, after all."

"You came all this way just to see me? I had figured you fervent believers would hate an irresponsible bishop like me."

"If I may speak my personal opinion, you're right."

"You're forthright..."

"Sir Souji, you should be more aware of your role as a bishop of Lunarian Orthodoxy, and comport yourself in a way that befits that position." Mary preached at him with a serious look on her face. "Though you are a man of the cloth, who ought to live a life of honorable poverty, you are infamous in the Orthodox Papal State for your fondness for wine and women. That hasn't changed since you came to the kingdom, has it? That is unforgivable for the person who must unite the adherents of orthodoxy in the kingdom."

"Yeah, yeah. Thanks for the sermon." Souji dug the earwax out of his ears.

He was simply not equipped to repent after being given a sermon by a girl that much younger than him.

"Did you come all the way to the kingdom to lecture me?"

"...No. I say this strictly as my own personal opinion."

"In that case, can we move on to the point?" he asked in irritation.

Mary's face took on a sad look as she said, "The Lunalith has handed down a new oracle."

"An oracle? Already?"

The Lunarian Orthodox Papal State centered their faith around a monolith called the Lunalith.

The oracles appeared by forming text on the Lunalith.

The Lunarian Orthodox Papal State based its rule and foreign policies on the oracles that appeared on the Lunalith. However, oracles were only supposed to appear once every five years or so.

It was said they had prophesied the emergence of the Demon Lord's Domain around ten years ago.

Then, just around a year ago, an oracle had descended saying, "Send a saint to Souma who was summoned from another world, and place him under the influence of your own country."

That plan had been cleverly thwarted by Souma, and though they had succeeded in making Lunarian Orthodoxy the state religion, it was a position shared with other religions, and the saint had been sent back so that they were

unable to place him under their influence. It was fifty-fifty on whether it was a success or not.

After one had come down so recently, had a new oracle descended already?

"Isn't the period a little short?" Souji asked.

"There have been precedents in the past. Though they say that when the time between oracles is short, the times are changing rapidly."

"So, what's the oracle?"

"'Northeast,' 'rising sun,' 'light that covers the world'... and 'burning countries.'"

"Huh? That's pretty fragmented."

"I'm told that's how oracles from the Lunalith are," Mary told a dubious Souji. "This is something only told to those in the upper echelons of Lunarian Orthodoxy, but we haven't accurately deciphered all of the oracles from the Lunalith. However, we can understand parts of them, so we piece them together and infer their meaning."

"Whuh?! The oracles are that vague?!"

Even for Souji this was a shocking revelation.

The oracles were a secret among secrets in the Orthodox Papal State. They said the Orthodox Papal State was ruled under the guidance of the Lunalith, but the truth was they could only read bits and pieces of it. That meant they were moving the faithful around on that sort of incomplete understanding.

A cold sweat ran down Souji's back. "...Is it all right telling me something only the higher-ups know?"

"Normally, this is information neither you nor I would be able to learn... however, the situation that is unfolding inside the Orthodox Papal State makes it impossible to enforce that." Mary lowered her eyes in sadness. "There were some disconcerting words in the oracle."

"'Burning countries,' you mean?"

"Yes. The Orthodox Papal State's higher-ups are divided over the meaning of these words. For 'northeast,' 'rising sun,' and 'light that covers the world,' they are united in their belief that it likely means, 'A great man with influence that will cover the world will appear in the northeast.' However, they are divided on what the 'burning countries' that will likely be burned at his hands are."

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Mary held up the index finger of her right hand for Souji to see.

"First, there is the group who see this great man as a threat. They think the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State may be one of the burned countries, and they propose that countermeasures must be prepared. Their main countermeasure is to form an alliance with the Kingdom of Friedonia. We may not have been able to make King Souma into the holy king, but activities of believers in the country are protected. If he were our ally, we would have a reliable backer. This group are the relative moderates, you could say."

"Hmm..."

In that case, Souji thought Souma might accept it. It would mean a burden for Souma, but not having to worry about the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State when he handled that rising faction would be huge. He wouldn't have to worry about them inciting the faithful inside the country anymore. If they were dealing with them not as the center of a religion, but as another equal ally, the kingdom would benefit from cordial relations, too.

Mary raised the index finger of her left hand. "The other group are the ones who have high hopes for this great man. They say that if a great man with such massive power is going to appear, we should send a saint, grant him authority, and bring him into the fold. Just like... when I was sent to be with Souma. This group is actively attempting to oppose other countries, so they're being called the radical faction."

"Radicals... More like extremists, right?"

"I won't deny it."

Well... I guess you'd expect there to be a group like that, Souji thought with a sigh.

The Orthodox Papal State gave Lunaria's authority to the power holders of the era, and received their protection in return. That was how the country had maintained influence over their citizens and believers up until today.

If it was looked at as the survival strategy of a nation, there wouldn't be anything more to say, but since it was his old home, Souji thought they were shameless.

"So? Which group has the upper hand now?"

"The radicals," said Mary. "I think the failure to make Souma a holy king played a large part in that. The Gran Chaos Empire in the west has their own saint, and they've failed to form strong bonds with the Kingdom of Friedonia in the west, so the higher-ups were feeling a sense of crisis."

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Empress Maria had never declared herself a saint, and wasn't backed by anyone as one, but that must have been how it looked to the Orthodox Papal State.

Mary continued. "For the radicals, if a new faction that can oppose these two countries is going to form, they see it as imperative that we form strong bonds with them this time."

Because Souma skillfully dodged ending up under Lunarian Orthodoxy's influence, he's ended up pushing the Orthodox Papal State's higher-ups into a corner, Souji noted.

And Souji carried a part of the responsibility for that, too.

With a rotten bishop like Souji in between them, the faithful inside the kingdom hadn't had to listen to orders from the Orthodox Papal State. There was no worry about the church stirring them up into riots, either.

That had the result of making the higher echelons of the Orthodox Papal State panic, and ironically fed the creation of a radical faction that were eager to join hands with a great man whose identity was as yet unknown in order to counter the kingdom and the Empire.

"The moderates are already starting to be purged by the radicals," Mary went on. "Cardinal Gold, who you were so fond of, was indicted for adultery and corrupt acquisition of wealth."

"Well, the old guy had it coming to him."

Cardinal Gold had risen through the ranks with the power of money. He was a corpulent man far from any ideal of noble poverty.

Souji had paid bribes to the man so that he had a free hand to do as he pleased while he was inside the Orthodox Papal State, but he'd had absolutely no respect for him as a human being.

Hearing that the man had been punished, *I guess it was time he paid the piper,* was all he thought of it.

"Well, which side are you on, little missie?" Souji asked.

"The cardinal looking after me belongs to the former."

"I was asking for your personal decision, you know?"

"I... don't know. No, perhaps 'I don't know anymore' might be the more accurate answer."

Mary stood up and looked at the stained glass mosaic. It depicted the goddess Lunaria descending from the heavens.

"When I heard King Souma say he would recognize not just Lunarian

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Orthodoxy, but other religions as the state religion, I thought he was acting haphazardly. That was because I thought different religions, different sects, couldn't possibly coexist without conflict. I felt pity for the believers in this country who were forced to live under such a king."

Souji was quiet.

"However... now that I see it, there have been no major conflicts, the believers inside the kingdom are not restricted in their activities, and they practice their faith at ease. More than that... Sir Souji, you carried out the Spring Announcement Festival inside the kingdom, didn't you?"

"Yeah, it was Young Miss Roroa's idea."

Mary put on a slight wry smile. "I think there may be some issue with calling a woman who is going to become queen 'young miss,' you realize?"

"She calls me 'old man,' so I'd say we're even."

"You're close... Well, setting that aside, I heard that many pagans participated in that Spring Announcement Festival. It's a festival announcing the end of winter and praising the glory of Lady Lunaria, and yet pagans who refuse to convert and believe in Lady Lunaria participated and enjoyed the festival with the believers. When I heard about that, I was very surprised."

"It goes both ways, though. Even orthodox adherents are taking part in Mother Dragon Worship's festivals."

"Yes. There were those in the Orthodox Papal State who were angry, saying, 'This is outrageous.' But I couldn't see it as a bad thing. It's strange. When we have discord emerging between members of the same faith in our country, a country that is a mix of many different religions has more mutual respect for each other's beliefs."

"Young lady, you've..."

...really changed, thought Souji.

The people called saints in Lunarian Orthodoxy were beautiful dolls who were absolutely loyal to the higher-ups in the Orthodox Papal State. They had no thoughts of their own, never doubted orders, and were offered up to powerful and influential men regardless of how they themselves might feel. That was how saints were meant to be.

However, Mary was unsure. It was proof she was thinking for herself.

Mary turned to Souji and bowed her head. "I've come with a request for you today."

"A request?"

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“Yes. To be more precise, I have a request I want you to pass along to Sir Souma.”

Seeing the sincerity in her eyes, Souji scratched at his head. “That’s fine for you to say, but I was dispatched here by the Orthodox Papal State. I can’t say anything about what the king here does. I don’t have any right to, you know?”

Mary nodded as if that much was self-evident. “I know. This is not too difficult. I am asking that he protect people. I’m asking that he protect those who will lose their place in the Orthodox Papal State should the radicals rise any further... or my sisters, at the very least.”

“Sisters?” Souji repeated.

“The hundred or so candidates for sainthood.”

In order to place the rulers of the time under their influence, the Lunarian Orthodoxy sent saints to them as a way of giving them authority.

Those saints, of course, had to be appealing to those in power, so the Lunarian Orthodoxy always maintained a stable of a hundred or so “saint candidates” so they could cater to all sorts of demands.

Mary had been chosen for Souma from among those saint candidates.

“If the radicals send a saint to the great man who it is said will appear in the northeast, and that great man accepts the saint, the rest of the saint candidates will become a liability. In order to monopolize the authority of Lunarian Orthodoxy, I’m sure the rest of the saints will be purged. If this great man is of such a fierce temperament that it results in ‘burning countries,’ that is more or less a certainty.”

“Well, I’m sure you’re right...” Souji admitted. “Are you the one they’ll send?”

“I am the saint prepared for Sir Souma. I’m sure that, for another great man, they will prepare a saint suited to that great man.”

“So, you’re going to be a liability, too...” Souji crossed his arms and groaned.

He’d known that Lunarian Orthodoxy had several saint candidates. For as long as those girls weren’t chosen, they were treated well as individual nuns, so he’d never thought much about it before.

However, internal conflict and external factors could easily mess with their fates. That was the kind of weak position those girls found themselves in.

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For his part, Souji wanted to save those innocent girls, too.

"I get it. I'll at least pass the message to Souma. I'll persuade him if he's hesitant, and I'll press my head against the ground and beg him to at least protect the saint candidates."

"You have my gratitude, Sir Souji."

"So, if you feel a threat to your well-being, you run, too. You may be a saint, but you're still young. There's no need for you to carry every burden."

"...Yes." Tearing up, Mary bowed her head to Souji.

Once the tears had dried, Mary put her hood on again and turned to offer a prayer to the stained glass before silently leaving the church.

Once Souji had seen Mary off, Margarita entered as if taking her place.

"That's quite the troublesome request she brought you," Margarita said with a wry smile.

"Well, yeah. Nothing could be more of a pain, but I am, technically, a bishop. I know this isn't like me, but if there are young maidens who've lost their way, I've got to extend a helping hand. Fortunately, I can move more easily than any bishop back in the home country."

When Souji said that, he looked up at the stained glass of Lunaria.

"Was it your guidance that led me to this country?" he asked.

The stained glass image had no answer to his question.

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— At the same time, near the western border of the kingdom —

This was close to the border with the Mercenary State Zem.

The Mercenary State Zem was surrounded by mountains, making it a natural state, difficult to invade other countries from, but easy to defend against invasion. There were few roads into Zem, and there was just one mountain road connecting the Kingdom of Friedonia and Zem that was fit for sending troops along.

Up on top of the walls of a city near the border and the road that connected to Zem were two old men, one of them Souma's martial arts instructor and sounding board, Owen, and the other Roroa's grandfather, who was the Lord of Nelva, Herman. They stared westward.

These two had been entrusted with handling the Mercenary State Zem, but Zem had made no major moves, so all they had been able to do was remain

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on guard. Still, it wasn't that there had been no movement whatsoever.

There was a report from the spies saying they were gathering soldiers near the border. However, those forces showed no sign of crossing the border to invade.

"Hmm..." Playing with his Kaiser mustache, Owen groaned. "It seems Zem is intent on waiting and watching. If the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State or the Republic of Turgis move, I'm sure they'll act to capitalize on that..."

"That country has always intervened in other countries' wars and gained land as a reward," Herman said. "They hardly ever fight a war alone. Sir Gouran has the republic under control now, and the Orthodox Papal State is keeping quiet for the moment, too. It looks like they'll keep watching like this."

Owen spun his thick arms in a circle. "How boring. And I felt it was so lucky when His Majesty entrusted this land to us to defend."

"You should be happy there's no trouble. Muscle-headed old men from the kingdom are too bloodthirsty for their own good."

"Hmph, I'd say we're a sight better than hard-headed old men from the principality."

When their eyes met, sparks flew.

They were warriors, old commanders, both intent not to lose to the young'uns. That similarity made them each view the other as a sort of rival.

Especially after a large amount of free time with no invasion of Zemish forces, and with no one like Souma or Roroa to make them restrain themselves, they were competing with one another over every little thing.

"I think we'll have to settle this with another mock battle," Herman said. "I'll have you retire from active duty today."

"I'd have it no other way. I'll give you time to be a doting grandfather to Princess Roroa."

The two with too much time on their hands had made a daily event of having mock battles like this. They wouldn't listen even if someone tried to stop them, so the guards nearby pretended not to see anything.

When these two fierce commanders fought, albeit with blunted weapons, the sound echoed around the city, inciting complaints from the residents.

The guards who would have to deal with those complaints sent resentful glares in the direction of the two energetic old men.

However, the mock battle didn't begin today. That was because...

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“Reporting. There appears to be a single mounted rider approaching from the west.”

A messenger came to report that information to them.

They leaned out over the edge of the wall, looking west, and there was indeed a single rider racing their way.

As the rider approached, they noticed that the rider was wearing an impressive suit of armor and two longswords crossed over their back.

Because their helmet had a full visor, it was impossible to see their face.

“Hoh... Their riding skill is impressive,” Herman commented. “They make a fine knight.”

Herman sounded impressed, but Owen said nothing, only staring at the knight.

That appearance, I’ve seen it before...

Then the knight came up to the gate and raised their voice.

“I speak to the keepers of this city! I bear a message from King Kimbal do Zem of Zem for King Souma Kazuya of Friedonia! Please, accept it, and deliver it to King Souma!”

The knight’s voice was loud, clear, and dignified, yet the slightly higher pitch made it clear it belonged to a woman.

Hearing this voice, Owen’s eyes went wide. “The woman’s voice... It can’t be?!”

“Owen?!”

Before Herman could stop him, Owen jumped over the outer edge of the wall.

Even though the wall was over ten meters high, Owen was able to kill his momentum with wind magic and land safely before rushing over to the female knight.

Looking at her up close, the knight had a long, thin, feline tail that extended from her rump and wrapped around her waist, meaning she was a feline beastman.

“Could it be, you are...”

“See to it that this letter makes it to King Souma.”

Before Owen could finish his question, the female knight pushed the letter into his hands.

Then, immediately turning her horse around, she raced off in the direction she had come.

“H-Hold on! Are you not Lady Mio?!” Owen shouted after her, but the knight raced on without looking back, and eventually vanished out of sight.

Herman came down from the wall and approached Owen who was just standing there “Why the face...? Just who is that female knight?”

“That person is most likely... Lady Mio,” Owen said, seemingly in a daze.

Herman cocked his head to the side. “Lady Mio? I haven’t heard that name before...”

“You were in the Principality of Amidonia, so I suppose you wouldn’t have,” Owen whispered, a pained look on his face as he looked off in the direction the female knight had departed. “Mio Carmine. The daughter of Georg Carmine, the former General of the Army.”

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Epilogue 1: Family

— A little past noon, 21st day, 12th month, 1,547th year, Continental Calendar —

"Whew... We finally made it back," I said, relieved.

"When you see the castle, the exhaustion just melts away, doesn't it?" Naden agreed, spinning her arms in circles after having returned to human form.

"You're right, when you see the castle, it really does feel like we've come home," Aisha put in.

"Hee hee! The castle really has become our home now, hasn't it?" Juna smiled.

Yeah, they were right. We'd finally managed to make it home.

After having returned to Parnam alongside the reinforcements we'd sent to the Union of Eastern Nations, we'd gotten in Naden's gondola and headed back to Parnam Castle ahead of the rest.

This wasn't a war, so there would be no triumphant return parade, and the main force would likely just be disbanded outside the castle walls. That work was being left to Kaede, as Ludwin's second-in-command.

Hakuya and Roroa came out of the castle to greet us.

"Your Majesty, hurry to Princess Liscia's side," Hakuya said without preamble.

"Ya better go quick!" Roroa added.

Those were the first things out of their mouths. It seemed they were in a hurry.

"Huh?! Did something happen to Liscia?!" I cried.

Hakuya nodded gravely. "I received word that she went into labor this morning."

Labor...? She was giving birth?!

Roroa jabbed me in the chest. "The doctors, Hilde and Brad, are already with Big Sis Cia. We'll be headin' over there, too, once our work's done, so get movin', Darlin'!"

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“Is that okay?” I fretted. “Should the king really be heading over there as soon as he gets back?”

Between the administrative work that had built up while I was away, along with dealing with the aftermath of having dispatched troops, there was surely a mountain of work to do. The bureaucrats must want me to return to my duties immediately.

But Hakuya just shrugged his shoulders. “You’re not going to be able to focus on your duties like this, anyway. If your lack of focus causes you to make a series of errors, that only results in more work in the end. Please, let us take care of things ourselves.”

“...Sorry. Thanks.”

I turned and spoke to my fiancées and little sister.

“You heard the man. Naden and I will be going to see Liscia. Aisha, Juna, sorry, but could you sort out the luggage in the gondola? I want you to come later.”

“Y-Yes, sire,” Aisha said.

“Understood.” Juna nodded.

“Roroa, I want you to come once your work is finished, too. Tomoe, show Ichiha and Yuriga to Hakuya’s place. If you want to come too, the three of you are welcome to join us later.”

“Gotcha,” said Roroa. “I’m countin’ on ya to take care of Big Sis Cia.”

“Okay, Big Brother,” Tomoe said obediently.

I straddled Naden’s back in her ryuu form. “Okay, Naden! Go as fast as you can, please.”

“Roger that! Don’t go fainting on me, okay?”

With that, Naden danced up into the air.

The ground sped away from us even more rapidly than normal. Normally, that would have really scared me, but in my haste to get where we were going, I didn’t have the presence of mind left to be scared.

Liscia... Liscia...

With me repeating her name in my head over and over, Naden and I headed straight for the former king Sir Albert’s domain, where Liscia was staying.

Having raced across the sky, Naden and I set down in front of Sir Albert’s manor.

As we did, I spotted the doctor Brad sitting at one of the tables on the veranda which could be seen from the gate. He was wearing a string-like thing diagonally over top of his white clothes.

I approached him, calling his name. “Brad?”

Brad noticed me. “Oh, it’s the king. That’s an interesting getup you’re wearing today.”

I realized I was still in my military uniform. We’d come here right after returning from the Union of Easter Nations, after all. There had been no time to get changed.

“I was in a rush... and, I mean, aren’t you wearing something kind of weird, too?”

“What choice do I have, the way things are here?”

Brad turned to show me his back, and there was a baby less than a year old strapped behind him. It turned out the string running diagonally across the front of his chest was for a baby sling.

When I approached and looked closer at the baby, it seemed to be sleeping. The wispy hair growing on the baby’s head matched Brad’s white hair, but on its forehead was the small, jewel-like third eye that was characteristic of the three-eyed race. Its puffy cheeks were adorable.

“Cute,” I said admiringly. “I’ve heard you have a kid. Is this your kid, Brad?”

“My daughter. Her name is Ludia.”

“Ludia, huh. You took the L and D sounds from the end of Hilde’s name, huh... Wait, I know Ludia’s cute and all, but now’s not the time for this!”

The adorable baby had momentarily distracted me from my original objective.

“I came flying when I heard Liscia had gone into labor, so what are you doing sitting around relaxing here?!”

“Fwah... Wahhhhhhhh!” Because of my shout, Ludia woke and burst out crying.

“Ah, sorry! D-Don’t cry,” I said anxiously.

“There, there... Could you not shout so loudly in front of Ludia?” Brad told me off while trying to soothe the daughter on his back. “Just having an adult they don’t know around is frightening enough for children.”

I feel like he’d been more prickly a long time ago, but now he was totally in dad mode.

The three of us worked together to get Ludia to settle down before I asked Brad the same question again.

"I'm sorry for shouting. But since it's twins, wasn't it looking like you were going to have to do a Caesarean section? If I find you, the head doctor, out here, obviously I'm going to be concerned."

"So, about that... we ended up not doing one."

"Huh?! Why didn—Mmph!"

"Souma! Quiet!" Naden covered my mouth and said that in a hushed voice. "You'll make the baby cry again, you know?"

The three of us looked at Ludia's face... Yeah, it looked like she was sleeping.

I moved Naden's hand aside and took gasping breaths.

"...Sorry. But why?"

"At the mother's request."

"Liscia's?"

"When I explained about the procedure, she refused. She said she didn't want her stomach cut."

According to Brad, she hadn't wanted her abdomen... or rather her abdominal muscles... to be cut during the Caesarean section.

For Liscia, who partook in the martial arts, having her muscles cut meant she might not be able to stand on the battlefield the same way she had before. That was apparently why she had requested a natural delivery instead.

"Fortunately, the babies are not in a bad position," Brad said. "In Hilde's estimation, a natural birth should be possible."

"Really?"

"Yeah. But she'll be in pain for twice as long as an ordinary pregnancy. There are two of them, after all. Well, even with that explained, the mother requested a natural delivery, so that's how it is... I don't really understand her thinking, though, to be honest," Brad said scratching his head.

I agreed, but Naden said, "I feel like I get it," showing some degree of understanding. Maybe it was some sort of motherly pride us men couldn't understand.

"Hilde's attending to her closely now," Brad said. "Obviously, if we determine she's in danger, we're prepared to switch over to the Caesarean. Are you all right with that, too, sire?"

"If that's what Liscia's decided."

She had chosen not to have her muscles cut even if it meant being in pain for twice as long.

Was Liscia that eager to stand on the battlefield?

Brad told me I could talk to her about the details in person, so we headed inside the house.

The maids were moving about frantically. The scene reminded me of the palace just after I was entrusted with the throne.

I spotted a familiar maid and called out to her. “Carla!”

“Wah?! ...Oh, it’s you, Master. You’ve returned to the country.”

The dragonewt maid Carla turned around. She was wearing a maid dress with a skirt short enough that she wouldn’t be out of place working in a maid café, but instead of a silver platter, she held a metal basin that even a grown man would have struggled to carry.

“We just got back,” I said. “What’s the basin for?”

“To hold hot water for the babies’ first bath. I was told bigger was better, so I flew off and found the biggest one in this domain.”

“No, isn’t this kind of too big? It’s the size of one of those small vinyl pools for children, you know?”

It was large enough that you had to worry about the babies drowning. Someone was going to be holding them during it, though, so it was probably fine...

“Wait, before that, show me to where Liscia is, would you?”

“Understood. She is in the large room upstairs.”

Naden and I followed Carla upstairs. There was a door in the second floor corridor that was left wide open. We could see maids constantly coming in and out of the room. That had to be where Liscia was.

Approaching the room, I heard what sounded like a woman’s groaning.

I dashed forward. “Lisci—”

“Stay out of the room!” someone shouted.

I came to a halt.

The three-eyed doctor Hilde came out. Hilde had an irritable look on her face as she put a hand on her hip and glared at me.

“I heard, and looking at what you’re wearing, I can tell. You were just up fighting monsters in the Union of Eastern Nations, right? And you came straight here as soon as you got back. Am I wrong?”

“Y-Yeah...”

“In other words, you came without cleaning off the grime from your journey. Don’t bring that filthy body into the same room as a pregnant woman and her babies! Weren’t you supposed to understand hygiene?!”

“Urkh... Sorry.” Hilde was absolutely right in what she was saying, so I gave her an honest apology.

In modern society, where we had proper hygiene, fathers were allowed to be present for the birth, but here in this world where that was not the case, it was probably better to leave things to the doctors.

Not only that, I had been touching monster corpses in the Union of Eastern Nations. I had wiped myself afterward, obviously, but I hadn’t taken a thorough bath yet.

“Is that... Souma...?” Liscia croaked from within the room.

I couldn’t see her with Hilde blocking the way, but I could hear her voice.

“Yeah, it’s me! Can we talk? You’re not in too much pain?”

“Yeah... I’m feeling up to it for now...”

“Y-You are? Well, I’m right here!”

“It looks like you made it. How about you, Souma? You’re not hurt anywhere?”

“I came back in one piece! Aisha and Juna and Naden and Tomoe all came with me! Roroa was holding down the fort for us, but she seemed full of energy, too!”

“I see. Good. You... didn’t do anything reckless, right?”

“Liscia,” Naden called. “This is Naden. What Souma’s saying is the truth. He may have been a little reckless, but he’s not hurt, so don’t worry.”

I heard Liscia chuckling. “So you *were* being reckless again... Maybe we need to have a little heart-to-heart later? But from what Naden says, it sounds like you’re okay...” She paused. “Thank you... for protecting Souma.”

“No, I just did what any ryuu ought to!”

“Souma, just stay there and don’t worry,” Liscia managed. “I’ll make sure I give birth to healthy babies.”

“‘Don’t worry’? You know I can’t do that! I hear you refused the Caesarean section, you know?”

“So you heard,” Liscia replied a little awkwardly. “Listen, if they cut open my abdomen, I might not be able to fight like before. I don’t want that. I still want to be able to command the military and fight in your place.”

“Y-You’re still planning to go out on the battlefield now that you’re a

mother?"

"Wouldn't any mother want her kids to see how cool she is?"

My shoulders slumped. "You're going to be one tough mom..."

Hilde made a shooing gesture with her hands and chased me off like a wild dog. "Now that you understand, take off that uniform and wash yourself. You leave the princess to me. I swear you'll be able to see her and the kids later."

"I'm counting on you..." I bowed my head to Hilde, then temporarily left the room.

While I was trudging down the stairs, Carla felt bad for me and raised her voice to say, "Y-You know, Liscia may not look it, but she's pretty tough. You must be exhausted from your long journey, Master. I'll get the bath ready now, so wash off the dirt from the campaign like Hilde said and get some rest, all right?"

"Wash the dirt off... huh."

I should pour some hot water over my head... No, in this case, there was something that felt more appropriate, wasn't there? I clapped my hands together as if I'd just come up with a brilliant idea.

"Okay. I'm going to perform *mizugori.*"

"*Mizugori?*" Naden looked confused.

I nodded. "It's a traditional method of prayer from my world. You pour well water over your head repeatedly to wash away the grime, while offering Shinto and Buddhist prayers."

"Well water? It's the middle of winter! If you do that in this cold, it's guaranteed to be unhealthy! Stop being stupid!"

"That's perfect," I said. "Liscia's trying her best, too. I need to do that much, at least."

"Just calm down already!" Every hair on Naden's body rose.

Bzzzap!

"Gyah!"

I collapsed on the spot.

Looming over my immobile self with her arms crossed, Naden sighed. "Honestly... This is so unlike you that I can't bear to watch. Calm down a little already. If you collapse because you're being reckless, that will cause delays in your duties and make trouble for everyone at the castle, okay? That's not something Liscia wants, either."

“Uhhh... But I’m worried.”

“I understand, but is pouring cold water on yourself going to change anything? A little water isn’t going to let the gods do anything for you. My god is Lady Tiamat, and she generally doesn’t even interfere in the world below.”

“That remark wouldn’t go over well with the followers of Mother Dragon worship or Lunarian Orthodoxy.”

“Besides, isn’t your whole thing that you leave the things you can’t handle yourself to other people? You can’t give birth, so trust Liscia, who can, to handle it.”

Naden was so right that I couldn’t say a thing in return.

Naden was a nonsensical being that could transform into a ryuu, but Naden herself was a common-sense person capable of reasoned thought. Her lecture to me made sense.

“You’ve got it more together than I give you credit for,” I sighed.

“That’s right. I’m the only one around to scold you right now. Aisha loves you like a loyal dog, Juna is too indulgent, and Roroa is more likely to goad you into doing something than stop you. I feel like I’ve gotten a lot of practice at it while Liscia’s been away.”

“You make me sound like some sort of problem child,” I objected.

“If you don’t have the self-awareness to see it, that’s pretty bad. But you were starting to get out of hand, so I want Liscia to hurry up and get back on the job soon.”

Wow, that was harsh. But I was in agreement about wanting to see Liscia soon.

“Oh, my.” A gentle voice came down to me. “If you sleep there, you’ll catch a cold, son-in-law.”

I sat up because the numbness was starting to fade and saw Liscia’s mother, the former queen Elisha, looking at me with a soft smile.

“If you’re tired, why don’t you come rest in my room?”

I wiped myself down in a hot bath, which Carla and the others had prepared for me after Naden’s stopping me from performing *mizugori*, and then put on a spare change of clothes I had borrowed from Sir Albert.

When I was finished getting changed and met up with Naden, who had likewise just finished wiping herself off, she was wearing a frilly apron-dress

that made her look ready to chase a rabbit to Wonderland. It really suited the petite Naden.

"I think you look cute in that outfit, but where'd it come from?" I asked.

"Elisha forced it on me."

It seemed the outfit Naden was now wearing was one that had been Liscia's when she was younger. However, given Liscia's personality, she hadn't been willing to wear it often, so Elisha had wanted to take this chance to get Naden to wear it.

Liscia in a frilly dress... No, I couldn't imagine it.

Naden transformed her scales into clothing (though it was all-black clothing) when she turned into her human form, so she didn't really need a change of clothes, but where was the harm, once in a while?

"You look good," I said. "Why not try dressing up once in a while?"

"I'll think about it," Naden said curtly, turning her head away, but her long tail was restlessly wagging back and forth, so it looked like she wasn't entirely against the idea.

While I was smiling wryly at watching Naden try to hide how she really felt, Carla came in.

"Master. Lady Elisha is waiting for you in the parlor. Tea has been prepared."

Carla put her hands together in front of her and bowed.

I felt like her performance as a maid had improved. Now that I thought of it, before we'd set out for the Union of Eastern Nations, Liscia had mentioned Carla was learning to cook with her. Maybe she'd learned various other things, too.

Carla led us to the parlor.

"I see you've gotten changed," Elisha said. She gestured for us to have a seat on the sofa. "Please, both of you, come this way."

Naden and I sat down side-by-side, and Lady Elisha personally poured tea for us.

"This herbal tea will help calm your nerves. Please, drink it first."

"Oh, sure," I said. "Thank you."

Watching her gentle smile, Naden and I both took a sip.

Oh... It was good. Quite relaxing, too.

While I was feeling at ease, Lady Elisha sat down across from us. "Has that helped you to calm down a little?"

“Yeah... Ah! Um, sorry.”

For a moment, I had seriously relaxed.

Looking at me, Lady Elisha chuckled. “It’s your first birth. I can understand why you’d be tense.”

“...I’m sorry. Liscia’s the one who’s really having a hard time, and I’ve been told I should leave this to her, but... I just can’t help but feel anxious...”

She chuckled. “Albert was the same when I was giving birth to Liscia.” Her eyes took on a nostalgic look.

Wait, huh?

“Now that you mention him, I don’t see Father anywhere,” I said. “Where is he?”

“Oh, I’ve shut him away.”

“...Come again?”

“Today he was even more distraught than you are, milling around restlessly, so I gave him a sleeping... I gave him some medicine to calm him down, and put him to bed.”

What a troublesome man, she seemed to say as she put her hand to her cheek and sighed.

Wait, no, no, no! Didn’t she just start to say “a sleeping drug”?!

“Did you drug—” I began.

“Hee hee. I’m sure he was so eager to see his first grandchild that he just couldn’t get to sleep last night.”

I was aghast.

Forgive me, Father. Some subjects are best left unbroached, so please just rest quietly for now.

I was speechless, but that was Liscia’s mother for you. Liscia’s tough mom routine may have been inherited from her. You could tell she’d held the right to the throne before relinquishing it to Sir Albert.

Then Lady Elisha smiled. “I’m worried, too, myself, of course. It’s really hard giving birth to a child. I can tell you that because I’ve experienced it myself.”

“Mother...”

“However, you’ve arranged the best environment possible. You’ve sent talented doctors, and built the best environment for giving birth in this country... No, in the entire world. My daughter is more blessed than anyone.”

I was speechless for a different reason.

...Oh, crap. That nearly brought me to tears.

Feeling uneasy about the high rate of infant mortality in this world, and out of consideration for Liscia and the rest of my new family, I had set out to reform the medical system.

When she came right out and praised me for it like that, I felt something catch in my chest. I don't know, I was just so grateful... I couldn't speak.

Naden slapped me on the back. "I'm sure you already know this, but Liscia's strong. If you weren't around, I'd almost want her to be my dragon knight. So... I'm sure it'll be fine."

"Ha ha..." I laughed weakly. "Is that supposed to be encouraging me? I'd be in a trouble if you two became dragon and knight on me. I want both you and Liscia to be my partners, you know."

"I-It was just an example... you dummy." Naden turned away, pouting.

I laughed and drank my tea. Then, exhaling, I finally settled down.

"...I feel pathetic," I admitted. "Seeing how cowardly I am next to Liscia."

"You're a man. It's only natural," Elisha said. "There are times when fear lets you detect danger and protect you family. It's a natural sense we all have as animals."

"...Thank you."

Thanks to her, I was feeling a little better.

Just as I was feeling relaxed, Carla barged into the room, hardly bothering to knock.

"Master! It's started!"

We all raced to the hallway in front of Liscia's room.

"Urkh...! Ahh...! Ahhhhh!"

From inside, we could hear the cries of agony. Just the sound had me beside myself with worry.

I knelt down, intertwining my hands in front of my forehead, and prayed that she would be safe.

To God, to Buddha, to Mother Dragon. Even to Lunaria and the gods of the minor religions.

Please keep Liscia and our children safe.

Naden put an arm around my neck and hugged me.

...

The time seemed to go ten times slower than usual. I don't know exactly how much time had passed, but that was how it felt.

“Wah...”

I heard a tiny voice, not Liscia’s, coming from the room. It was not large, but not too small, either.

When I looked up, Hilde emerged from the room.

“It’s a boy. His cries are a little quiet, but his color is good, and I see no problems.”

Having announced that, Hilde immediately returned inside the room.

...They were born. Were they born?

No, that was just the first. There was one more.

Please, let it be born safely! And let Liscia be safe, too!

I waited, praying like that for a while, and...

“Wahhhhhhhhhh!”

There was an inexpressibly loud cry.

Unlike the previous voice, this one was loudly broadcasting that it had been born.

Hilde came out again.

“The second child is a girl! Who’d have thought it? A quiet boy and a girl with too much energy. Wouldn’t you just know your children would turn out like that?”

Hilde gave me a teasing smile.

The sudden release from tension made my shoulders slacken.

I unclasped my hands, letting them slump to the floor.

A boy and a girl.

The twins had been born safely... Thank goodness.

“Wait, is Liscia all right?!” I exclaimed.

“Have no worries. The moment the second was born and I let her hold her, she fainted in relief.”

“F-Fainted...”

“She struggled a long time. She’s just sleeping out of exhaustion. When she wakes up, you give her the praise she deserves.”

“Of course... Of course I will...”

Overwhelmed by emotion, tears began flowing from my eyes.

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Where... is this?

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I was in an empty space filled with milky white fog.

Huh? What was I doing up until now?

Where's Souma? Where did everyone go?

While I vaguely wondered those things, I suddenly noticed a humanoid figure in a place a little ways away.

Two of them, actually. The figures were apparently looking at me.

The faintly glowing figures gradually took form, becoming like diminutive old people.

Judging by their silhouettes, were they an old man and woman?

Even squinting I couldn't make out their faces, but somehow... I felt like they were smiling. Smiling gently in my direction.

I felt as though I knew who they were.

Um, could it be, you're...

The moment I tried to say it, the two figures went further away.

Then the figures turned to me and bowed their heads. Until they vanished out of sight.

It was as if they were entrusting me with something that was very precious to them...

That's when I woke up.

Looking up, there was a familiar ceiling.

This was my room in Father's manor.

My whole body felt heavy. And tired.

I felt like if I relaxed even a little, I would lose consciousness again.

"Whoa! What's all this?!" a voice shouted.

This voice was... Roroa? I looked down and found Aisha, Juna, Roroa, Naden, and Souma all around the bed where I was lying.

"They're so cute!" Roroa squealed. "Just look at her tiny little hands."

She was making a big fuss over something wrapped in cotton.

"Roroa! M-Me! Let me hold her next," Aisha fussed.

"Here, Big Sis Ai. The princess sure is full of energy, ain't she? She cries loud, and she's always flailin' her arms."

"Hee hee." Juna giggled. "You could say the prince is tame in comparison. Even with all the excitement around him, he's sleeping and doesn't cry much. Here, Tomoe."

"Wow, he's so cute and pudgy!"

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What's everyone having so much fun with?

While my addled brain pondered that, it happened.

"Fweh... Wahhhhhhhhhh!"

It was a wail loud enough to clear the mist from my head.

"Whoa, what're ya doin' there, Big Sis Ai?!" Roroa objected.

"I... I was just holding her! There, there, don't be scared."

"Sh-Should I turn into my ryuu form and make funny faces?"

"That's guaranteed to backfire," Juna said. "I'd recommend against it. Should I try singing?"

"Sh-Should I let her cuddle my fluffy tail?" Tomoe asked tremulously.

"Seriously, what are you all doing?" I asked in exasperation.

Everyone turned and looked at me in unison.

"Liscia, ya woke up!" Roroa squealed.

Everyone was speaking at me from different directions, and when I turned to my side, Souma was sitting on the bed and peering at my face.

Ohh, I was wondering why I couldn't see him, but there he is.

"Wahhhhhhhhhh!"

Hold on... There had been a baby crying for a while now...

Wait, huh? A baby?

...!

That finally woke me up.

"Souma, the babies?!" I shouted.

"They were both born safely. You really worked hard." Souma gently stroked my cheek.

Oh... They'd both been born safely. I'd been so desperate that I didn't remember what happened all that well, but... now that he mentioned it, I recalled Hilde let me hold something warm before I blacked out. That had probably been one of the children's warmth.

Naden came carrying the twins, laying them at either side of my pillow.

When the crying girl was laid down next to me, she instantly stopped crying. The boy was doing as he pleased and sleeping.

Our children were swathed in white blankets. They had been born safely. Nothing could have made me happier.

"When I look at the children's faces, I can feel that my priorities in life have been changed," Souma said, looking at their faces. "When I met you and the others, I felt your lives meant as much to me as to my own. But these

children are a level even above that. If the time comes, I feel like I've got to give my life for these kids."

"I know how you feel, so much that it hurts, but that's not something a king should say," I told him. "The lives of every person in this country rest on your shoulders, you know?"

"I know. But the part of me that isn't kingly genuinely feels that way." Souma gently stroked my cheek with a smile. "That's why we have to protect the kids no matter what, 'Mom.'"

"...You're right, 'Dad.'"

When we said that and shared a laugh, Aisha, Roroa, Juna, and Naden joined in laughing, too.

"As your kochiji, I pledge to protect not just you, sire, but these children as well, with every fiber of my being," Aisha said. "I know! When they grow up, can I teach them martial arts?"

"Sounds good," Roroa grinned. "I'll teach 'em accountin', too."

"Hee hee, I suppose I would teach them to sing, then?" Juna asked.

"Teaching them to fly... isn't something I can do," said Naden. "But if I let them ride on my back, maybe it'll be good training for riding an aerial mount like a wyvern."

Souma watched the other four get excited with a wry smile.

"Hey, now... Don't put too much pressure on them, okay? If you cram too many skills in there, they'll never master any of it."

I giggled a bit. "You're right. If they'll just grow up healthy, that's enough for me." I gently stroked the children's foreheads. "So, fellow moms, please look after these children. I will, too, of course, and when all of our children are born, we'll raise them all together."

They all gave me a firm nod.

"Of course, Lady Liscia," said Aisha.

"Hee hee. Let's raise them all to be healthy."

"Darn straight," Roroa agreed. "With the group we've got here, we ain't gonna ever have domestic troubles."

"Roger that!"

Hearing four reliable responses from the four of them, I said to Souma, "This family... let's protect it, no matter what. And for that..."

"Yeah. I need to make this country stronger and firmer."

Because this country was our house. I needed Souma to protect it, and to

go on supporting Souma.

For the sake of these new lives, too.

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Midword

Thank you very much for purchasing *Realist Hero* volume 9. This is Dojyomaru, who recently bought himself a road bike.

I was afraid of the position drop handlebars force you into, so I'm starting with a flat handlebar.

We're back to the midword format again. I really struggled with the composition of this volume.

Before, I wrote that the appeal of internet novels is that you can write as much as you want of whatever you want, but with freedom comes responsibility. When it comes time to correct and edit what I've written, I am expected to take that responsibility.

The varying lengths of chapters, the number of them, where each story should go... It's a headache, so I need to show a certain amount of restraint.

It's not fair to only address the good points, so I've written the bad points now, too.

Now then, back to the main story: Souma and Liscia's children have been born.

A twin boy and girl.

From the time I first began writing this novel, I've been thinking about a "normal" life in another world. Though he has the special circumstance of having been summoned to another world, suddenly having the crown forced on him, and needing to face the troubles of the nation, Souma meets normal people, falls in love normally, and has children normally.

The reason I write what day, month, and year it is at the beginning of each chapter is so that you can feel that flow of time. Though sometimes I have readers point out that the schedule is unreasonable. Sorry about that.

I hope you will continue to watch over Souma's "normal" life now that he's added two new members to the family.

Also, while there are those who seek normalcy, there are also those who seek the unprecedented.

That would be the man Fuuga Haan who appears in this volume.

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That man is a concentration of the author's conception of the sort of great man who appears in epic legends.

He is born in a time of stagnation, is looked to by the people to shatter that stagnation, and he actually does so. The result brings destruction and murder, but the people of the era accept it. They see the destruction as necessary to break out of stagnation.

When you hear it that way, maybe a great man from history appears in your heads. The men who are spoken of as heroes or tyrants all have this facet to them to one degree or another.

He is that sort of troublesome being, and someone Souma will have to deal with going forward.

Now then, after this midword, we have a collection of stories focused on the side cast. The time frame will move back and forth, so it may be difficult to follow, but please bear with me to the end.

I give my thanks to the artist Fuyuyuki, whom I am always troubling, to Mr. Satoshi Ueda of the manga adaptation, the appeal of whose adult characters always excites me, to my editor, to the designers, to the proofreaders, and to all of you now holding this book.

This has been Dojyomaru.

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Cast of Characters Arc 1: Children and their Guardians

This happened around the time that Souma had returned from the Union of Eastern Nations, had flown to the former king Albert's old domain on Naden's back, and was anxiously waiting for the children to be born.

Hakuya was in the castle, dealing with the "souvenirs" Souma had brought back.

"I've returned, sir!" Tomoe chirped.

"Welcome home, Little Sister. I am glad to see you're safe."

With that enthusiastic greeting, Hakuya patted Tomoe on the head. Then he looked at the two standing behind her.

"These must be the two you've brought back from the Union of Eastern Nations. Sir Ichiha Chima of the Duchy of Chima, and Madam Yuriga Haan of the steppe country Malmkhitan, right? A messenger kui from His Majesty has apprised me of the situation. I am the Prime Minister of this country, Hakuya Kwonmin."

"I-I'm Ichiha Chima. I'll be in your care."

"I am Yuriga Haan. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Prime Minister."

Ichiha was timid, while Yuriga was bold.

Though it was more obvious with Ichiha, it was plain to see that Yuriga was tense, too. The reason she appeared bold was that she was putting up a strong front.

With a slightly wry smile, Hakuya said to the two of them, "There's no need for overly formal greetings. You are the school friends of His Majesty's little sister. Feel free to just call me Hakuya."

Ichiha looked nervously. "O-Okay, Sir Hakuya."

"Very well," Yuriga said.

Tomoe looked over at her. "Ah, but that doesn't mean you can just call him by name. You have to call him Mr. Hakuya when he's acting as your

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teacher, Yuriga."

"Why are you only saying that to me?! I have at least that much common sense!"

"Do you really...?"

"Just how do you look at me?!"

"Like this?" Tomoe stared unamusedly at Yuriga.

"Don't look at me like that, you little kid!"

Tomoe's response was slurred into incomprehensibility as Yuriga pulled on her cheeks. Tomoe must have found how fast Yuriga got angry amusing, because she was grinning even as she pulled her cheeks.

"H-Hold on, you two! You're in front of Sir Hakuya, you know?" Ichiha tried to intercede, but he didn't have a personality that let him speak firmly, so they weren't listening to him.

Hakuya watched the noisy three in front of him in surprise.

So... she can make a face like that, too. The little sister who was so reserved and shy about everything is having fun like a girl her age when she's with Madam Yuriga and Sir Ichiha.

When he thought about it, there had been no one but adults around Tomoe before now. Both in the refugee camp and since coming to the castle, she had been surrounded by older people like Souma, and Liscia, and Hakuya, so she'd had no friends her own age.

But now Ichiha and Yuriga were here, which must be why Tomoe was playing around so happily.

Whatever the case... I'm just happy to see her enjoying herself. Hakuya thought with a gentle look on his face.

"Now, listen here!" Yuriga said demandingly. "I'm older than you two, get it? Show a little respect."

"Whaaa? But Yuriga, you're only a little bigger than I am," Ichiha protested.

"W-Well, I'll get even bigger! In all sorts of ways!"

"I think Ichiha's going to get big," Tomoe contradicted. "Mutsumi and his brothers and sisters were big, after all."

"Y-You think...?" Ichiha asked hopefully. "I'd like that."

"Hold on! You're a little squirt, too, Tomoe! You're gonna be small forever, aren't you?"

"Murrgh. Big Sister Liscia has a good figure. I'm sure I'll be just like

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her...”

“You’re the former king and queen’s *adopted* daughter, aren’t you?” Yuriga shot back. “Your adopted sister’s figure doesn’t come into this.”

“It does, too! One of these days I’m going to be as bouncy as Juna...”

“Um, this conversation is getting awkward to listen to. Can we maybe stop it? Are you listening?”

As he watched the children endlessly keep making noise, Hakuya pressed a hand to his forehead.

He was pleased to see Tomoe so energetic. However, he suspected that the three of them together were too energetic.

I believe His Majesty decided I would be in charge of educating them until they are able to attend school next spring. The little sister was no problem on her own, but if I have to teach this boisterous trio... I’m in for a real headache.

While he listened to the boisterous children, Hakuya imagined his future being dragged around by these three, and he felt just a little dispirited.

After a little while, the three of them settled down.

“These are... incredible.” Looking at what was in front of him, Hakuya let out a sigh of admiration.

With introductions out of the way, Hakuya and the children had come to Hakuya’s room in the castle.

There were several pieces of paper spread out on top of the table where Hakuya normally taught Tomoe. These were all pictures of monsters that Ichiha had drawn.

“What is this? It’s kind of creepy,” Yuriga said as she lifted up one illustration and scrutinized it.

Maybe he was used to that response, because Ichiha took the paper from her with a forced smile.

“Ahaha... It really is weird, huh. Drawing all these pictures.”

“It is not!” Tomoe said indignantly, taking him by the hands. “Big Brother said your pictures are mankind’s treasure.”

“T-Tomoe...” Ichiha got embarrassed and blushed a little.

Yuriga must have found that hard to believe, because she cocked her head to the side while looking at the pictures. “They don’t look like such great pictures to me.”

“No, these are excellent pictures.” Hakuya placed his hands on Yuriga’s shoulders and spoke in a gentle voice. “Because monsters are dangerous, it is difficult to create circumstances where researchers can study them in the field. That means those studies advance slowly. However, Sir Ichiha has accurately captured their defining traits, and on top of that, he has categorized them in his own way. With further sorting and organization of these pictures, I expect the study of monsters would advance greatly.”

Ichiha tried to disagree in a vanishingly small voice. “N-No... You’re exaggerating...”

“There was no hyperbole in my words.”

Hakuya honestly believed what he’d said.

“On this continent, I believe we could call Sir Ichiha the foremost expert on monsterology. That he is only a ten-year-old boy makes me eager to see what the future has in store for him. I believe this is a rare gift from heaven. I should have expected no less from His Majesty the recruitment maniac. His sometimes-bizarre behavior causes me headaches, but when it comes to finding talented personnel, I have to be impressed with him.”

“You’re awfully harsh on your lord and master,” Yuriga commented.

“H-He’s been through a lot. An awful lot.” Tomoe clapped a hand down on Yuriga’s shoulder as if to say, *Don’t say any more.*

Souma’s bizarre policies often led to more work for Hakuya, and Tomoe had seen the exhaustion on his face time and again. Of course, Souma, the source of that exhaustion, often looked tired himself, so she couldn’t really blame him for it. But...

Hakuya cleared his throat loudly. “Ahem... Anyway, these are magnificent pictures. I’d like to compile them into a book someday. Under Sir Ichiha’s name, of course.”

“A... a book? No... It’s too much for me.” Ichiha shook his head back and forth.

Hakuya gave him a small smile. “Naturally, when the time comes, I’ll help oversee the process. Countries which place a high value on mystery like the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State take a narrow view of this sort of research into the unknown. In order to avoid agitating them, perhaps we should intersperse as little personal opinion as possible, and simply report the truth in a matter-of-fact way. Like a dictionary or encyclopedia, a basic handbook that leaves the speculation to the person making use of it.”

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“A monster encyclopedia... you mean?” Ichiha asked.

“Oh, that’s a good name, the Monster Encyclopedia. If we’re going to the trouble of making it, we’ll want it to be a book every future monsterologist will keep close at hand.”

“If that could happen... it would be wonderful. I-I’m getting all excited now,” Ichiha said happily.

Hakuya felt the same. He was an unparalleled lover of books, and when it came to written works, he could hardly contain himself.

Despite the large age gap between them, Hakuya and Ichiha eagerly discussed the composition of their Monster Encyclopedia, while Tomoe and Yuriga were left out, watching them with exasperation.

“It’s amazing men can get so engrossed in all this nonsensical stuff, don’t you think?” Yuriga complained.

“Ahaha! Juna told me that’s just how they are, you know? She was repeating what she’d heard from Duchess Walter, but that’s supposedly what’s cute about them.”

“Is that how it works?” Yuriga wondered. “Then they could be at this forever. Show me around the castle. Somewhere we could get good food would be preferable.”

“Sure. Let’s go to the Ishizuka’s Place cafeteria. I wonder if Poncho is in?”

Leaving behind the two excited men, Tomoe led Yuriga out of Hakuya’s room, pulling her by the hand.

For all their squabbling, the two were good friends.

Incidentally, Hakuya and Ichiha were still talking when the two returned after getting a snack from Poncho, only making them more exasperated.

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Meanwhile...

“I’m terribly sorry!” Inugami cried.

In the day care that took care of the children of women who worked at the castle, that member of the clandestine Black Cats unit was kneeling with his head bowed in front of Tomoe’s real mother, Tomoko.

Tomoko’s eyes went wide at his suddenly bowing his head to her, but when he raised his face, Inugami spoke with a voice full of chagrin.

“Even though His Majesty entrusted me with Lady Tomoe’s safety, I took my eyes off her, and Lady Tomoe was exposed to danger. I am truly sorry!”

Inugami was apologizing to Tomoko over the incident in the Union of Eastern Nations.

When they were staying in Wedan Castle, the castle of Duke Chima, Inugami had left Tomoe’s side on a request from Souma despite being her bodyguard.

In that span of time, Tomoe had slipped out of their room and gone to explore the castle, resulting in her getting into a fight with some officers from the forces of the Union of Eastern Nations.

Ichiha’s efforts and Souma’s timely arrival had prevented anything too bad from happening, but Inugami still regretted leaving Tomoe’s side.

“Please, stand up, Sir Inugami,” Tomoko said in a gentle tone of voice, having heard the details. “If you don’t, Rou is going to climb on your back, you know?”

“Huh?”

“Ah! Don’t stand, after all!”

He hadn’t noticed because he’d been distracted by the apology, but a four-year boy with wolf ears was attempting to climb Inugami’s back.

Rou was Tomoe’s little brother.

Rou kept climbing up Inugami’s side, and when he reached the peak of his back, he grinned as if in pride at reaching the summit.

The heartwarming scene made Tomoko smile.

“It all happened because of Tomoe being naughty,” she said kindly. “You were away because of your duties, so it is nothing for you to be concerned about.”

“But if anything were to happen to Lady Tomoe...”

Inugami couldn’t stand up with Rou standing on his back, so Tomoko crouched down in front of Inugami and poked him in the snout.

“I’m happy about it.”

“Huh? You’re happy?”

“That’s the sort of personality that girl always had before. Mischievous and curious about everything. When she was younger, she was the sort of energetic kid who was always disappearing on you. Like me when I was little. She was a troublesome little tomboy.”

Mischievous and full of energy. With a tomboyish streak she’d gotten

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from her mother.

Inugami blinked, unable to connect this description of Tomoe he was hearing from Tomoko with the Tomoe he'd known up until now.

Tomoko continued speaking with a look of nostalgia in her eyes. "Our family has been through a lot. We lost my husband to sickness soon after Rou was born, then we were driven from our homeland by the monsters, and drifted to this land as refugees. That girl's current personality was formed in that environment."

When Tomoko spoke, she seemed sad about not having been able to let her daughter remain a tomboy. It hurt Inugami to see that.

"Madam Tomoko..." he began.

However, Tomoko gave him a gentle smile.

"But lately she's been much more cheerful. That must be because His Majesty, along with her adopted parents Lord Albert and Lady Elisha, has been so good to her. If she's gotten to the point where she can be naughty and sneak out of her room, I couldn't be happier. I'll give her a stern talking-to later, though. I truly am grateful to all of you."

Seeing the mischievous look on Tomoko's face, Inugami added, "But if anything were to happen to Madam Tomoe..."

"If anything were to happen, you'd protect her, right?"

When she looked at Inugami, her eyes were serious. It was proof of her trust in him.

Seeing those eyes, Inugami crossed his arms in front of himself. "Of course. Even at the cost of my own life."

"Oh, my. Do take care of your own life. If you don't, Rou would be sad. He's grown so fond of you. Rou, do you like climbing on Sir Inugami's back?"

"Aye!" Rou responded energetically.

Inugami turned his face downward in an equal mix of happiness and shame.

Then Tomoko gently asked him, "Are you free after this, Sir Inugami? I have a break coming up, so would you join me for tea?"

"Yes, ma'am. I have nothing scheduled, so I will accompany you."

Inugami lifted Rou up from his back and placed the boy on his shoulders. With his point of view elevated even higher, Rou cooed with delight.

Tomoko laughed. "Hee hee! You don't need to be so formal with a

common person like me, you know?”

“I-It’s just my nature, you see. I’ve been in the military so long, always around nothing but men, so I had little chance to interact with women... Ah! I wasn’t supposed to say the part about my military record!”

“Tee hee. I’ll pretend I never heard it, then.”

And so the two of them (plus Rou on Inugami’s shoulders) walked off side-by-side.

They were of similar races, so even if Inugami was wearing a mask, they looked like nothing if not two parents with their child.

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Cast of Characters Arc 2: Genia and Merula, Unveiling the Deepening Mysteries

— Late in the 10th month, 1,547th year, Continental Calendar — Parnam Castle —

On this day, as temperatures were starting to get chilly, Parnam Castle was very quiet.

Of course it was, though. Right now, all the people who might have been at the center of all the usual noise at the castle were away.

The master of this castle, the provisional king Souma, was reinforcing the Union of Eastern Nations against the demon wave at the behest of Empress Maria of the Gran Chaos Empire. He was being accompanied on this campaign by his fiancées Aisha and Roroa, along with many other people.

Furthermore, as his first primary queen Liscia had returned to her father Sir Albert's domain to give birth, Carla and many of the other staff had been sent with her.

Because of that, Souma and his merry friends were almost all away. In spite of that, things had stayed fairly lively until recently, because of Duchess Excel Walter being there holding down the fort.

But then, because of the situation changing in Lastania, the place Souma had gone to reinforce, he'd ended up needing Excel's power as a great water mage. Upon hearing this, Excel had taken the plan drafted by Prime Minister Hakuya and gleefully headed for the Union of Eastern Nations.

Then yet another person who was at the center of the usual noise was gone.

Parnam Castle was very peaceful and quiet without Souma and his people around. To the point that the castle's workers, who had grown accustomed to the hubbub, now felt something was lacking.

However. There was still an energetic pair left in the castle.

"It's time for Genia—"

"—and Merula's—"

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“‘‘—‘Let’s Test It!’’’’

Thrusting their fists skyward, the overscientist Genia Maxwell and the high elf from the Spirit Kingdom of Garlan raised their voices in unison.

Though she had shouted along with Genia, once they were done, Merula’s shoulders slumped and she let out a sigh. “Hey. Do we have to do this every time?”

Genia poked Merula’s puffed-up cheeks. “It’s important to get into the spirit of things, Merumeru.”

“I told you not to call me Merumeru!” Merula protested.

But Genia laughed it off and began speaking in the direction of no one in particular.

“Now then, as for where we are today...”

“Who are you talking to?! Are there ghosts here?!”

“Ta-dah! This is the Summoning Room where the king was summoned as a hero.”

“Come on, who are you talking to?!”

“Hm? I’m imitating one of Big Sister Juna’s educational programs. As if there were a broadcast jewel over there.”

“Save your playing around for somewhere else! Ugh!” Maybe she was fed up with playing the straight man in this comedy routine, because Merula’s shoulders slumped hard. “Just give me a break. Sir Ludwin and Souji are both away for today.”

“Big Brother Lu is with Souma and the rest up north, and Sir Souji has gone to the border with the Lunarian Orthodox Papal State, right? That means we’re both without our keepers,” Genia grinned.

“Don’t call them our keepers! You don’t mind being treated like a pet, is that it?”

“I don’t really mind. Meeeeow.”

“Please be human, for the sake of Sir Ludwin’s stomach, if nothing else.”

Merula was as much of a research maniac as Genia, but she had proper common sense when she got away from her research. That was why, with Genia’s keeper (?) away, Merula was being forced to act as the straight man in this duo.

Trying to get back on track, Merula put her hands on her hips and said, “Honestly... So, you were saying this is the room King Souma was summoned to? Is this the place where he and Liscia had their fated meeting,

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too?”

“I hear those two met in the governmental affairs office. The king had just finished an all-nighter, so he may have had black circles under his eyes, too.”

“There’s not a shred of romance in that...”

They were talking about the hero summoned from another world and this country’s princess, so couldn’t the two have had a more dramatic meeting?

Then again, recalling both of the relevant individuals’ faces, well, it was certainly like them.

“So, we’re investigating this room today?” Merula asked.

“Yep. The king’s asked us to research the system known as ‘hero summoning.’ Of course, it’s a mysterious thing that calls people from another world, so even an overscientist like me is going to struggle to completely understand it.” Genia shrugged.

Merula crossed her arms with a pensive look on her face. “Hmm, don’t you think King Souma knows that? He’s hoping we can still find some hint anyway. I’m sure of it.”

“Yeah. You’re probably right about that. So then, Merumeru, enchantment magic is your specialty, right? How does this room look in your eyes, I wonder?”

Merula narrowed her eyes a little and touched the wall.

Because she’d already shifted her head into researcher mode, being called Merumeru didn’t bother her in the slightest.

Merula looked around the room and then said, “I can tell that advanced spells have been woven into this entire room with no gaps, no waste. It’s a higher-level enchantment technique than we could possibly hope to replicate today. Even I can only read a fraction of it.”

“Hmm... If even Merumeru can’t read it, I think we can safely conclude this room itself is a product of overscience, like the Jewel Voice Broadcast jewels.”

Having said that, Genia reached out to touch the wall, but Merula stopped her.

“Don’t touch it too much. If even a small part of it is lost, we can’t replicate it.”

“But you touched it, didn’t you?”

“I only touched where it was safe to. You can’t even tell the difference, right?”

“Well, I don’t have much knowledge about enchantments, after all...” Genia withdrew her hand and brought it to her chin, cocking her head to the side. “But... doesn’t this feel a bit odd? Even if there’s an enchantment too complicated for us to replicate in modern times here, is this something where a single room’s worth would be enough? It’s like a baby trying to lift up a rhinosaurus.”

“I’m not sure about the analogy, but... I agree.” Merula looked around the bare room. “It’s true that this spell has been woven in a complicated style with maximum efficiency, but I don’t think this volume could be expected to bring about such a large effect... In fact, looking around, I feel like it’s all the same sort of spell.”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“The spells carved into this room were likely made with *one single objective* in mind.”

Genia seemed not to understand. “Well, yeah? I mean, this room is for summoning a hero.”

“When we talk about summoning a hero, that’s the emergent result of a variety of overlapping phenomena, right?” Merula bent her fingers, counting off the conditions for the summoning. “It requires connecting two worlds, selecting a person who meets the criteria, transferring that person without regard to time and space...”

Each of those conditions was important, and if even one of them failed, Souma wouldn’t have been summoned.

Merula stopped counting. “...Well, anyway, there’s so much more to the process than I could enumerate. What I’m trying to say is this room is just one part of that process.”

“Wha?! You’re saying this room is only part of the hero summoning?!”

“That’s what it would mean, yes.”

“Incredible...”

If all the spells packed into this room were just one part of the system of hero summoning, just how large was the full scale of it?

And where exactly was it?

While trembling at the massive scale of this overscience, Genia was burning with curiosity.

“In that case, we’ll have to figure out this room’s role first!” she declared. “If we know what process the spells in this room are a part of, we can likely

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figure out how important this room is."

"True. I can decipher parts of it, so let's give that a test."

And so their investigation began.

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— Two months later, on a chilly day —

I sighed loudly, looking around the governmental affairs office. "Hahh..."

"Don't sigh," Hakuya chastised from beside me. "You'll get me down, too."

No, no, this was the sort of thing that would make anyone want to sigh.

It was just the day before yesterday that Liscia had given birth to twins. But in my position as king, even if my children had just been born, I couldn't stay with Liscia and the twins forever.

While looking at their sleeping faces, I had received a message from Hakuya back in the castle:

"I heard the children were born safely. Congratulations. Now, for the sake of those newborn children, please return here and resume your work as king."

Even as everything else had been going on, the paperwork that I, the king, needed to settle had continued to pile up.

"We're fine, so go do what you have to do, Souma," Liscia had told me, so I'd left Aisha, Juna, Roroa, and Tomoe there and ridden Naden back to the castle.

Oh, geez... I seriously wanted a system of paternity leave. If this was how it was going to be, I wanted to finish work for today quickly and fly back to Albert's domain.

"Let's take this at full throttle, full turbo!" I exclaimed, looking around for my ride.

"Oh, if you were looking for Madam Naden, she flew back to Sir Albert's domain, you know?"

"She left me behind?!" I yelped. "How could she?!"

As I was getting enraged at this unexpected betrayal, suddenly there was a knock at the door.

I called out, "Please, come in!"

It was the researcher duo, Genia and Merula, who showed up. They were

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usually so boisterous, but today they seemed somewhat out of sorts for some reason.

"What's wrong, you two?"

"Well... we have a report to make on the investigation you requested." Genia said, her eyes wandering.

The investigation I'd requested? Oh, the one on the ritual of hero summoning.

If I could find out just a little about the workings of the ritual that brought had me here, I might be able to figure out if there would be others summoned like me after this.

I wasn't holding out any hope that I'd be able to travel back and forth between my old world and this one, though.

"So, what did you find out?" I asked.

"Only a very tiny thing, really," Genia said. "It's about that summoning room... Let me come right out and say it. The spells in that room had nothing to do with summoning someone from another world."

"...Come again?"

Huh? The room they'd been calling the Summoning Room had nothing to do with summoning someone? ...No, but... Whuh?

"I'm here, and I was summoned, you realize?" I said.

"That's true. But... nearly all of the spells in that room concerned linguistic ability."

"Linguistic ability?" I repeated.

"Allow me to explain," Merula took over. "This is only as far as I can decipher it, but the spells in that room were all related to what you called 'the hero's mysterious translation powers.' I was able to pick up words connected to language on the walls, floor, and ceiling. Basically, the function of that room was merely to make it so that the hero could communicate with the people of this world."

"Merely...?"

My voice trailed off.

So, basically, that room wasn't for summoning heroes, it was like being put through a crash course in foreign languages for communicating with another world (or eating Translation Jelly)?

I cocked my head to the side. *But it's a fact I was summoned to that room, you know...?*

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“Well, we can’t say definitively that it’s all about translation powers,” Genia interjected with a wry smile. “Merumeru’s ability to decipher the spells was limited, so we can’t say for sure that there was nothing related to summoning in that room.”

As she spoke, she got more and more enthusiastic.

“But if the translation ability required spells that complicated, I can’t even imagine what it would take to summon a person from another world. I don’t see it fitting into the spaces that Merumeru couldn’t decipher. That’s why we came up with a hypothesis!”

Genia held up her index finger.

“That room is just a small part of the hero summoning, and all it contains is the spells to enchant the one who is summoned with the translation ability, and the spell to initiate the hero summoning system. In other words...”

“That room only has the translation function and a switch, and a hero summoning system too vast to fit in that room exists out there somewhere?” I finished.

“Exactly!” Genia said cheerily. “You really are quick on the uptake.”

None of this made sense to me anymore. The room I thought had summoned me was just a part of a larger system...?

“Well then, where is the rest of the thing that summoned me?” I asked.

“Well, when you considered all the spells needed just for your translation ability, I think it would have to cover more than just this castle. It would take the size of this entire capital city.”

“The entire capital...? It takes a spell that ridiculously big?!”

“Yeah. On that note, there was another thing that caught my attention. You’re aware of the shape of the castle walls around this city, right?”

“Yeah. They’re *circular.*”

I hadn’t paid it much mind, but the walls around the capital Parnam were unusual in that they formed a circle. (Refer to the beginning of Chapter 1 in the first volume.) Most other cities were rectangular, so it felt as though special attention had been paid to the appearance of the capital.

Genia pulled out a map of Parnam and spread it out on the table. “I want you to look at the map of this city. When you look at Parnam from the air... doesn’t it look like a sort of magic circle to you?”

““Huh?!”” Genia’s words made both Hakuya’s and my eyes go wide.

Now that she mentioned it, it did look like a magic circle or a mandala.

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The castle was in the center, and there were large roads leading out in the four cardinal directions, while smaller roads spread out like a spider's web.

And, though they couldn't be seen on this map, there were also the secret escape tunnels for the royal family which we now used as a sewer and aqueduct system crisscrossing each other underground.

If they had enchantment spells carved into them, too...

"Basically... the capital of Parnam itself was created to summon a hero?" I asked.

"That's our thought."

"Hakuya, you said the king who founded this country was summoned from another world, like me, right?" I asked. "Wasn't Parnam built by the first hero king?"

Hakuya was well versed in this country's history. He shook his head with a stern look on his face. "No, the Elfrieden Kingdom was founded by the first hero king, but there was a kingdom in this land before then. It's said that the city of Parnam dates back even further than that."

A city that predated the first hero king...

In that case, Genia and Merula's hypothesis was sounding more and more realistic. Maybe one of the "old ones" like the Mother Dragon, Madam Tiamat, was involved.

It looked like more research into this matter was going to be necessary. Not just by Genia and Merula, but a large number of researchers.

"Did you learn anything else?" I asked.

"Well, there was one thing that bothered me," Merula said. "We talked about how the spells in that room were meant to allow the hero to communicate with the people of this world, but... I felt it was a little indirect in the way it did it. I don't know, it felt too roundabout."

"Roundabout?"

"I meant that if their only goal was to allow the hero to communicate with the people of this world, they didn't need a spell that complicated. If I recall, you speak the words of your world's language, and we understand them as the common language of this continent... right?"

"...Yeah. I feel like that's how it was explained to me."

I spoke Japanese, and the people of this world understood it as the official language, Continental Standard. But it was still Japanese, so when I tried to explain words or concepts that didn't exist in this world, they didn't

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understand. Words like “smartphone” and “anisong,” which didn’t exist yet in this world, were not translated.

That was likely why, when Juna sang a song that I had sung in exactly the same way I had sung it, Liscia couldn’t understand the lyrics.

“That. That’s what I’m talking about.” Merula looked bothered by this. “Honestly, it’s too roundabout. Rather than making us understand the language of your world, it would have been far simpler to make you understand ours. If the spell did that, the only target would be you yourself.”

She... certainly had a point, yeah. Compared to influencing the minds of an unidentified number of other individuals, it would have been much faster to change just mine.

“The thing is, you’re able to write in the language of this world, right?” Merula went on.

“Now that you mention it...”

I could read and write the language of this world. That was why I could do paperwork.

That was likely because I had been made able to understand the writing in this world. If so, why didn’t the spell do the same thing for spoken language?

“Why do you think that is, Merula?” I asked.

“Well... I feel like that was the intent of the people who created these spells.”

“Their intent?”

“No matter what, they wanted to leave *your language* behind. I can feel that intent. Even if it made the spells painfully complex as a result.”

My language... huh.

Now that I thought of it, there was that cube-shaped object that I’d encountered with Naden in the Star Dragon Mountain Range.

It had been creating a tempest and bombing wildly as if in a violent rage, but the moment it heard my voice, it had suddenly seemed to stop.

That time, Tiamat had said I was the “key,” but... maybe the real key was in the language I spoke.

Augh... My head was starting to hurt. I felt like I was starting to understand, but I still didn’t understand anything. It was frustrating.

In the end, I wasn’t going to figure it out by talking about it here, so I decided to continue investigating this matter.

Seriously... What is *this world?!*

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The two of them left, and work was done for the day, so I mulled it over in my head as I headed for the courtyard where a wyvern was waiting to take me to Liscia and the twins.

This world was where I, my wives, and my children lived.

I could only pray that no more unsettling events would occur here.

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Cast of Characters Arc 3: The Drill Princess of the Empire

— At the end of the 11th month, 1,547th year, Continental Calendar — The imperial capital, Valois —

It happened at around the time Souma was in the Union of Eastern Nations.

The place was the little sister general Jeanne's office in Valois Castle, where Empress Maria Euphoria lived, next to the center of the imperial capital Valois in the Gran Chaos Empire.

There Jeanne and Friedonian ambassador Piltory Saracen sat facing one another.

Piltory bowed his head to Jeanne. "I'm sorry. I'll have to return to the kingdom again."

With a wry smile, Jeanne gently said, "It's the younger sister this time, right? Isn't this something to be celebrated?"

"I'm grateful to hear you say that."

After Piltory's wife Anzu had been found to be pregnant, he had returned to the kingdom temporarily to leave her in the care of his family, the House of Saracen.

Once Anzu had safely given birth to a son, she'd returned to the empire with that child to be with Piltory.

Now, immediately afterward, Anzu's younger sister Shiho was the one to get pregnant.

Thinking it would be best to have her give birth at the family home, like Anzu, Piltory had once again requested leave to return home from the kingdom and empire. His request having been granted, he was here to pay his respects.

"I will be returning once I leave Shiho at the family home, like last time, so Anzu will take care of your communications with the kingdom during that time," he said. "If anything should come up, please ask her. It seems my

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personal business has been interfering with my duties and keeping me away from the empire, and that pains me, but...”

Piltory had a truly apologetic look on his face, but Jeanne waved her hand.

“No, no, don’t worry about it. You’re doing this for the child that will be born. Besides, Sir Souma himself will be having a child soon, too, won’t he?”

“Yes, that is what I hear.”

“Princess Liscia, a mother... I feel like she’s gotten ahead of me somehow.” Jeanne let out a little sigh.

They had both been mischievous princesses who’d troubled the servants as children, so where had this difference formed between them? It was true that Jeanne hadn’t had a special meeting like Souma and Liscia’s, but the biggest reason was probably that elder sister of hers.

I can’t go looking for a partner while my sister is still single. If she would just find herself a wonderful gentleman already, I could be more proactive...

Through her mind flitted the image of that black-robed man with the clever but warm eyes.

Wait! No, no, that’s out of the question!

Jeanne shook her head as if to dispel the notion from her mind.

I know he’s not the sort of person I could handle just by being more proactive. He’s a distant man, in many senses of that world. But if... if our empire were more stable, and my sister found someone nice... I could be more true to my feelings...

Imagining herself at his side, Jeanne felt her lips form a smile.

Well, imagining it is no harm, I guess, she told herself.

Incidentally, Maria would be twenty-one this year (twenty-two by Earth’s calendar). In Souma’s world, it would have been cruel to start acting like she had taken too long to get married at that age. Yet Jeanne was worried that her sister was approaching old maidhood.

This was because marriageable age for women in this world was fourteen. So in the upper classes, where political marriages were the norm, it was recommended a woman be married by twenty.

Lost in thought, Jeanne reflected...

“Um, Madam Jeanne?” Piltory asked. “Is something the matter?”

“Oh! No, excuse me. Let’s see... Sir Souma is likely away at the moment, so when he returns to the country and the child is born, please give him my sister’s congratulations.”

“Ohh! Thank you for that.”

The ability to celebrate the birth of a child in another country’s royal family was something made possible by the cordial relations between the kingdom and Empire.

As the two of them were having that conversation...

Boooom! Crash!

There was a loud explosion, and the castle shook up and down powerfully.

Piltory thought it must be a sudden earthquake, but the shaking ended unexpectedly quickly.

While he was wondering what it was, he noticed Jeanne had a hand pressed to her forehead.

“I-Is something wrong, Madam Jeanne?! Did you get hurt in the tremor just now?!”

“No... I just got a headache thinking about all the cleanup I’ll need to do after this. Honestly, that girl...”

“That girl?”

As Piltory was about to ask for more details, the door slammed open. The one who came rushing into the room was Empress Maria Euphoria herself.

“Jeanne! Was that explosion—”

“Sister, what are you doing dressed like that?!” Jeanne shouted, cutting Maria off.

Maria was wearing pajamas and a nightcap, her bedclothes. It was past noon, but her hair was disheveled as if she had been sleeping until just a few moments ago.

For Piltory, who had only known the noble beauty of the woman called the Saint of the Empire, the gap was so great that his eyes bulged out.

“Please, dress yourself properly! Sir Piltory is here, you know?!” Jeanne cried.

“Oh, my, Sir Piltory. Good morning.” Maria gave him an elegant greeting despite being in her pajamas.

So long as there was a smile on her beautiful face, even if all she wore was pajamas, she possessed a picturesque beauty.

Jeanne gripped her head. “It’s already noon. It’s past time to be saying ‘good morning.’”

“Well, I was working until morning, and I finally managed to find time to

sleep, you know? Just as I was setting off on a pleasant journey to the land of dreams, I was jarred awake by that explosion. Do you think that girl was the cause?"

"No one else sets off explosions in the castle. I wonder what she'll have destroyed this time..."

"She put a big hole in the castle walls last time, didn't she...?"

The beautiful sisters let out a shared sigh.

Jeanne gave an order to the female guards standing ready outside the door.

"Secure *the culprit* at once, and bring her to this room."

""Y-Yes, ma'am!""

The guards immediately took off running.

The culprit... If they knew who she meant from such a vague description, did that mean the guards knew who the culprit was, too?

In that case, was this a common occurrence?

"Um... Who exactly is this girl you two have been talking about?" Piltory hesitantly asked.

Maria and Jeanne looked at one another and responded in unison.

""Our little sister.""

Roughly ten minutes later...

Looking like a picture of an alien being dragged off by men in black, a girl of about fifteen was hauled in by the royal guards.

She had the same beautiful blonde hair as Maria and Jeanne, and she had cute, girlish looks, but her wrinkled white coat and the way her hair stuck up spoke to her slovenly nature.

One defining feature was her hairstyle. Her long hair was tied into a spiral on her right side.

When the captive girl was brought before Jeanne, who was giving off an aura of wrath, she greeted her timidly.

"G-Good day to you, Big Sister Maria, Big Sister Jeanne."

"Does it look like we're having a good day, Trill?" Jeanne asked with a glare.

"Eek?! I-I'm sorry!" Trill cowered like a kitten curling up in the cold, and bowed her head repeatedly as Jeanne lectured her.

All three of them bore the blood of the royal family, yet when you saw

them like this, they were like any normal sisters.

Seeing Piltory bewildered and unable to follow the situation, Maria spoke up with a troubled smile on her face.

"Let me introduce you, Sir Piltory. This is our youngest sister, Trill."

"I... I am Trill Euphoria." Having been freed from the lecture, Trill was quick to introduce herself and try to keep up appearances. "I am not aware as to who you might be, but is a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"P-Pardon me. I was sent here by the Kingdom of Friedonia. My name is Piltory."

"The Kingdom of Friedonia?!" Trill's eyes went wide. "When you say the Kingdom of Friedonia, you mean the one that used to be the Elfrieden Kingdom?! They have *the* Genia of the House of Maxwell!"

"W-Well... I don't know this Madam Genia... whoever she is, but I have heard of the House of Maxwell. They've made a name for themselves researching the ruins of a dungeon or something like that, I believe."

For a military man like Piltory, he was not tied in to the details of who all the different bureaucrats were. However, the House of Maxwell was so infamous as a family of oddballs that even he had heard of them.

"Um... Why would Madam Maria's younger sister be interested in the House of Maxwell?" he ventured.

"Because I am a huge fan of the Maxwells!" Trill declared, her eyes sparkling. "When I read their publication, *The Conversion and Accumulation of Magical Energies*, I was amazed! I could tell that this would be what made my ambition come true...!"

"Trill! We are not done yet!" Jeanne shouted at her.

Trill's shoulders twitched.

The third princess of the Empire had spoken passionately about the kingdom's infamous House of Maxwell. *Do eccentrics attract eccentrics?* Piltory wondered.

Jeanne let out an exasperated sigh. "Now then, Trill, what exactly have you broken today?"

"Jeanne, there's no need to jump to the conclusion she's broken anything..."

"Please, stay out of this, sister. You heard that noise, felt the tremors. We should be prepared for some losses."

"L-Losses, no... It was nothing big. I just put a tiiiiny hole in the ceiling of

my underground laboratory...”

“You two,” Jeanne groaned, ignoring Trill’s claims and speaking to the guards who had brought her in. “How bad were the damages?”

The guards saluted and reported exactly what they had seen.

“There was a great hole opened in the courtyard.”

“It appeared to be over five meters in diameter.”

“That is not a little hole!” Jeanne slammed the table.

The noise made not just Trill but Maria jump, too.

Jeanne ordered the guards out of the room, and after confirming they were gone, she sighed again.

“Your actions lately have been completely unacceptable. Every time you cause a problem, every time you destroy something, it undermines our elder sister’s dignity and creates more work for me.”

“B-Big Sister, my research is...”

“We understand that your research will serve to benefit the future of this empire. That is why we do not ask you to do your duties as the third princess of the Empire, and instead allow you to do as you please in your study.” Jeanne banged on her head as if in pain. “However, you are getting very close to the limit. Not with us, with the vassals. They’re starting to express the opinion that it’s about time we punished you, you realize?”

“Urkh...”

Failure might be the mother of success, but in her case, Trill had been born into the wrong bloodline for it.

She was the younger sister of Empress Maria, who ruled a vast empire, yet remained cooped up in her laboratory creating things all day, failing incredibly, and occasionally blowing up the walls and causing damage.

That bad reputation didn’t only affect her; it was also a risk that could impact Maria’s authority, too.

With a pained look, Jeanne told Trill, “This is getting out of hand. Isn’t it about time you called it quits? Why not give up on your studies, and return to your position as the third daughter of the imperial house?”

“...” Trill hung her head, unable to say anything in return.

A heavy atmosphere hung over the room. Having suddenly been swept up into their family troubles, Piltory was nervously wondering what to do with himself.

As if to bring a breath of fresh air into the room, Maria clapped her hands.

“If we can’t handle her, why not leave her to someone who can?” she said in an easygoing voice.

Jeanne’s eyes went wide. “What is this, out of nowhere?”

“I just had a little idea. You know, ever since we formed an alliance with the Kingdom of Friedonia, Piltory has been here as resident ambassador to the Empire, but we haven’t sent anyone in return, have we?”

“You’re right. It’s a secret alliance, so choosing someone has been difficult... Wait, Sister, you can’t mean...”

Jeanne had a bad feeling. Maria smiled wide and said, “Yes, I do. Let’s send Trill to the kingdom as our resident ambassador.”

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“...So, there you have it, Sir Souma. Please take good care of our sister.”

“‘There you have it’?” I repeated. “There I have what...?”

Let me tell you what happened. I came back from the Union of Eastern Nations, was present for Liscia giving birth, was forced back to the castle when twins were born, and three days after that, I had a troublemaker from the Empire pushed on me. You... You guys think I don’t know what I’m talking about. You’re right, I don’t know what’s going on at all...

“Trill, you mustn’t cause trouble for Sir Souma, all right? Take care of yourself,” Maria said.

“I know, Big Sister Maria.”

Right now, a young girl of about fifteen with her blonde hair in rolls, who had been sent here from the Empire, was beside me, waving to Maria through the Jewel Voice Broadcast.

Her name was Trill Euphoria.

Their faces might be similar, but their personalities weren’t. It seemed Maria’s little sister was a researcher.

Her repeated massive failures had apparently made it difficult for her to remain in the Empire, so she was being sent off to my kingdom as their previously-yet-unchosen ambassador.

I had been briefed on this by Piltory, who returned to the Empire after returning home for a brief time.

Honestly... Gouran leaves Kuu with me, then Fuuga saddles me with Yuriga, and now this. Aren’t these people a little too quick to leave their VIPs

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in my country?

"I know our castle has a day care, but we only handle infants, you know," I said.

"Would you kindly not treat me like a child?! You're disrespecting a lady," Trill protested, but I ignored her.

Maria was chuckling. "Oh, my, I thought you liked creative and capable personnel, Souma? Trill is the most unique and creative researcher in the Empire. I'm sure you'll take a liking to her."

Sighing, I asked, "What sort of research do you do, anyway?"

"Hmm." Trill cutely cocked her head to the side. "In order to explain that, I'll need to tell you that old story."

"Huh? Old story?"

"Yes, that is correct. Long, long ago, in a certain country..."

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Long, long ago, in a certain country, there was the strongest warrior.

That warrior was blessed with a tough body, along with a collection of superior arms and armor.

That warrior looked at the spear he was holding and said, "My spear is the sharpest in the world. There is nothing it cannot pierce."

Then, pointing to his armor, the warrior said, "My armor is sturdier than the walls of a fortress. Nothing in this world can pierce it."

Hearing this, the warrior's master asked, "If you stab the armor that cannot be pierced with the spear that can pierce anything, what will happen?"

The warrior was unable to answer, and he was greatly embarrassed.

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"That's the old story," Trill said.

"..."

Trill's story was just the story behind the etymology of the word for contradiction or inconsistency in Japanese and Chinese, only with the halberd traded out for a spear, and the shield traded out for armor.

It came from the *Han Feizi,* I think?

The author of that work, Han Fei, wrote on how a sovereign should rule

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from the perspective of a realist, but the contents of that work were so harsh that even Machiavelli was nothing in comparison.

That was because Han Fei had lived in a time of chaos, when seven great men were at war, and he had lived in the imperial court, which was rife with conspiracy. If one were to faithfully put into practice what he wrote, the king would have no one left to trust.

Zhen, the King of Qin, who became Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of China, was a Han Fei fan and had an element of that to him, but I personally didn't want to ever go that far.

But I digress.

Anyway, as long as there were words there were going to be logical paradoxes, so maybe it wasn't that odd that a similar story would be created here.

With a dissatisfied look, Trill went on, "But I think that story is strange."

"Well, strange logic is how you get paradoxes, after all." I wondered why she was bringing up something so obvious.

But Trill shook her head. "That is not what I meant. The spear wins."

"Oh-ho. Why is that?" I was interested now.

Trill raised her index finger and began to explain. "Once you put on the suit of armor, you're done. However, the spear has room for improvement. Let's assume the armor has a hardness of ten, and the spear has a sharpness of ten. First, there's the speed of the thrust. If you strike twice as fast, your attack power becomes twenty. And by twisting as you stab, you double your penetrative power again. Therefore, the spear's attack power should be able to rise to forty."

"Th-That makes sense..." Aisha, who was at my side as a bodyguard, seemed convinced.

As if that was right!

"No, that logic is wrong, okay?!" I shouted.

What was that logic like something out of a battle computer? There was no way it simply doubled like that.

Still, Trill went on with an incredibly serious look on her face. "Naturally, those numbers are fuzzy. But if you thrust a drill-shaped tool at a two-centimeter-thick wooden board, it won't pierce it easily. However, if you press it against the same point and spin it around continuously, it becomes possible to open a hole in the board."

“Well, yes... That’s right.” Huh? At some point she had started to convince me.

“What I was studying was a system to keep that spear spinning.” Trill grinned and made a spear-thrusting motion. “There are physical limits our body structure imposes on how much spin we can put on a thrust. That is why I was looking into developing a spear that constantly spins. During the testing process, however, the prototype flew off and put a big hole in the castle walls...”

“That constantly spins... Ah!”

I got it! She was talking about making a spear spin, so it hadn’t clicked immediately, but she was trying to create a drill! Or, more precisely, a motor that could keep a drill spinning. This in a world that didn’t even have the steam engine.

If she could really make one, it would be a technological revolution.

“You said you put a big hole in the castle walls?” I asked. “How big are we talking?”

“I learned that if I forced magical energy into a support pillar discovered in a dungeon it would revolve, so I was able to get it spinning. However, without knowing any way to apply constant, stable energy, there were repeated misfires.”

I went silent.

I knew this because I had visited Genia’s dungeon laboratory, but technology in this world didn’t seem likely to follow the same path as on Earth. Using materials discovered in the dungeons, they could gain access to technologies that were a leap ahead.

Also, wasn’t the solution to providing constant, stable energy like Trill was talking about the curse ore we used in the Little Susumu Mark V?

“I was studying various things after reading the House of Maxwell’s publication, *The Conversion and Accumulation of Magical Energies*, but I just can’t find the right material,” Trill said, sounding frustrated.

Genia’s house had put out a book like that?

Hmm... If the empire was studying its own ways of accumulating magical power, they might discover the use of curse ore in the not-too-distant future. Other countries could, too.

If that happened, our advantage would disappear.

There was Fuuga to consider, too, so I wanted to spur on a technological

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revolution.

“It seems you have something on your mind, Sir Souma.” Maria suddenly interjected.

While I’d been lost in thought, it seemed she’d been staring at my face.

Shoot... I’d been nearly fooled by her soft smile and easygoing aura, but Maria wasn’t someone I could show openings to.

“Do you perhaps have some hint that would help Trill’s research?” Maria asked. “I believe the kingdom is home to the esteemed House of Maxwell that she so respects.”

“Th-That’s right! I would so love to meet them!” Trill jumped in excitedly.

I wanted to dodge the subject, but... bad lies weren’t going to work against Maria.

“I think, with Genia’s knowledge, we could manage it somehow,” I said reluctantly.

“That’s marvelous. How about it? Why not make Trill’s research a joint research project for our two countries?”

“Joint research... you say?”

“I think the technology Trill is attempting to develop will have a variety of uses. To the point that it may revolutionize this world’s technology.”

That was a fact. A boring machine was one thing, but a motor was another. There were no end of uses for it.

If something could turn on its own, there were any number of things that could be done with that.

“I don’t want to reveal too many of my own cards, you know...”

“Oh? You aren’t interested in the techniques Trill has, Sir Souma?” Maria asked.

“I want them, of course...”

“In that case, isn’t this perfect? There’s a technology both of us want. Let our countries study it together, and we’ll share the results.”

Maria’s proposal sounded highly enticing.

It was difficult for one country to research everything because of the limited personnel, funds, and time. I had been made painfully aware of that while reforming the medical system.

If necessary, I would sometimes have to bring in personnel, funding, and time from other countries. If it was the Empire under Maria, it could be

trusted, too.

"In that case, I'll have you put up half of the costs for the research, too, you know?" I asked.

"Of course. Will you take us up on the offer, then?"

"No, I can't give you an immediate answer. I'll discuss it with Hakuya, and we'll get back to you about our conditions later."

"That makes sense. It seems my excitement caused me to get ahead of myself." Maria pulled back, a little disappointed. She looked like a dog who had just been made to wait after being shown a treat.

With a wry smile, I told her, "But I, personally, am enthusiastic about the idea. I think I'll have Madam Trill meet with Genia."

My words set Trill's eyes sparkling. "I can meet the people of the House of Maxwell! Why, this makes me so happy!"

Maria giggled. "Good for you, Trill. But you're there as an ambassador, so you can't neglect that work to focus on your studies, okay? If you do, Jeanne might head over there to drag you back home."

"Urkh! I wouldn't want that. I will do my work properly." Princess Trill gave her sister a firm salute.

Thus another odd and talented individual came to the kingdom.

For now, at least, I'd leave her to Genia's keeper Ludwin to look after.

Here's hoping he doesn't end up eating cheap bread again...

"Oh, by the way, Sir Souma," Maria put in, "I hear you had twins."

Now that things were settled, Maria said that as if she'd just remembered, and lifted the hem of her skirt in a graceful curtsy.

"As empress of the Gran Chaos Empire, I will pray for your son and daughter's healthy growth, and the kingdom's continued development."

"Thank you. Let's both do our best, for our homes and our families."

"Yes."

And so, ties between the kingdom and Empire deepened once again.

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Cast of Characters Arc 4: The Young Master's Awakening, The Girls' Determination

It was the day after Trill Euphoria's arrival as the Empire's ambassador to the kingdom.

A certain individual was in the Jewel Voice Room in Parnam Castle, speaking to someone in another country.

Normally, only Souma or Hakuya used the Jewel Voice Broadcast, but things were different today. This person had stark white hair and a long, thin tail.

"So, there you have it, Old Man," that person was saying. "I want to do things my way, so can I get your permission as the head of the republic?"

"Hmm..."

The one standing in front of the jewel was Kuu Taisei, the visiting commander from the Republic of Turgis, and the one he was speaking to was his father back in the republic, Gouran Taisei.

Basically, Kuu had gotten permission from Souma to use the jewel to communicate with his motherland.

Gouran thought about it for a while, then eventually nodded. "Yes... It's not a bad proposal, considering it came from you. You have my permission, so make it happen. I will entrust the negotiations with Souma to you."

"Ookyakya! Wouldn't have it any other way," Kuu said gleefully.

Gouran's eyes narrowed a little. "Who could have foreseen the day that you, of all people, would offer up such a useful strategy?"

"Ookya? It's not often I get a compliment from you. You eat something funny?"

"Don't let it go to your head," Gouran sighed. "Honestly... Just a little praise, and you act like this. I was thinking your time in the kingdom had helped you to grow, but it seems I was mistaken."

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Kuu let out a jolly laugh. “Ookeekee! The personalities we’re born with don’t change that easily. Well, not that I thought I’d grown to begin with.” Then his smile suddenly faded. “Well... I did have a change of heart, though. Now that I’ve seen *that man,* I can’t just stay the way I’ve been. We’ve got preparations of our own to make.”

“The young king of Malmkhitan who was in your report?” Gouran asked slowly.

“Yeah. Fuuga Haan. He’s crazy.” Kuu’s arms were crossed, and he had an extremely serious look on his face. “My bro Souma and Empress Maria of the Empire are incredible rulers, too, sure. Bro’s way of delegating tasks to those best suited to them, and the charisma Empress Maria uses to rule over a massive empire, amaze me. But in both cases, they’ll remain friendly toward us for as long as we don’t oppose them. No matter how great the gap in our strength, they’re not going to start wars on their own for no good reason.”

“And you’re saying this Fuuga is different?” Gouran asked doubtfully.

Gouran had received a report on Fuuga Haan, but he couldn’t understand why Kuu, and even Souma, according to Kuu, saw him as such a threat.

Why were they so cautious of the king of a petty state so far from the republic?

Was there something he couldn’t infer from the report, a certain atmosphere around the man that only those who met him in person would know about?

“Yeah, that was my read on him,” Kuu said. “Fuuga’s willing to make not just small sacrifices, but big ones, too, for his dream. If it would further his dream, he might invade the snowy lands of the Republic of Turgis, even knowing they’d cost him more than they’re worth. Bro had the same feeling, too.” Kuu had an earnest look in his eye. “If the worst should happen, we’ll need the power to handle Fuuga ourselves.”

“I see...” As he nodded, Gouran was impressed.

When Kuu had been in the republic, he’d seemed to always be flying by the seat of his pants, but now it looked like he had his eyes on the future.

That was surely because he’d been influenced by seeing how Souma ruled in the kingdom, and the appearance of someone who might become a powerful enemy had encouraged his growth.

“Then you, too, must do your best not to be outdone by the young kings,” Gouran said.

“Ookyakya! I know that. Well, I’m off to where Bro is now.”

As he watched Kuu run off, leaning into the wind, Gouran reflected that his son had become reliable.

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— The next day, in the royal capital Parnam’s castle town —

It was a cold, busy day toward the end of the year, and Kuu and Leporina, the Turgish master and servant pair, were racing along the rooftops.

“Good for you, Young Master,” Leporina praised him. “The negotiations have come together.”

Kuu responded with a jolly laugh. “Ookyakya! When I made him match my conditions, Bro frowned pretty hard, though. I was stubborn, pushed him, buttered him up, took advantage of his weaknesses... and somehow got him to give in.”

“I was behind you watching, but Sir Souma, he looked tired, you know?”

Leporina knew.

She knew that Kuu had tied Souma up for a whole hour when his children had just been born and he was swamped with work, being stubborn, pushing him, buttering him up, and taking advantage of his weaknesses until he’d extracted wildly favorable conditions. Of course Souma was going to look exhausted.

This was the sort of thing that risked angering the king and having them thrown out of the kingdom, but Kuu had a good sense for people’s hearts. He’d done a good job of keeping on Souma’s good side as he negotiated.

However, Kuu laughed this off as if it were nothing. “Don’t make it sound like I was being unreasonable. Bro’s not going to be hurt by this. Well, he may not be hurt, but I sure took a chunk out of what he stood to gain. Ookya!”

“Sigh... I really do think it’s incredible the way you can be like this.”

“Hm? Is that a compliment?”

“It is. Half out of exasperation, though.”

While the two of them were talking, they jumped down in front of a certain workshop on the craftsmen’s street.

This was the workshop their childhood friend, Taru, who was here to provide technical guidance in this country.

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Kuu knocked and then immediately flung the door wide open. “Hey, Taru, you in?”

A cool girl of the snow bear race, who had white bear ears on her head, was in the process of carrying a bucket of water. “It’s the Dumb Master... and Leporina?”

“Hello, Taru,” Leporina greeted.

The snow bear girl blinked, cocking her head to the side. “You were able to make it back already?”

“Yeah,” said Kuu confidently. “We got back with the rest of the reinforcements days ago. Had some work to do, so I couldn’t get over here, though.”

“Days ago...”

Seeing the ponderous look on Taru’s face, Kuu got a question over his head as he asked, “Ookya? What’s wrong, Taru?”

“...Nothing,” Taru said with a sour look and then turned away.

Kuu cocked his head to the side in bewilderment, but Leporina felt like she could understand why Taru acted like that.

Not “you’re back already,” but “you were able to make it back already”... huh, Leporina reflected. *I’m sure she was worried about Master Kuu while he was up in the Union of Eastern Nations slaying monsters. Yet, even though Master Kuu has been back for days, he hasn’t come to see Taru until now. That’s why she’s sulking... or at least, I’d say that’s it.*

Leporina could only smile wryly at the way her awkward childhood friend felt.

With no idea how either of them were feeling, Kuu went on, “Anyway, Taru, I’ve got a favor to ask.”

“What? If you’re going to ask me out on a date again, like always, I’m busy now...”

“That’s not it. I mean, I *do* want to go on a date, but that’s not what I’m here about today.” Kuu had a more serious expression on his face than usual.

Seeming to notice this, Taru made a point of hearing him out properly. “...What’s going on?”

“For now, let’s just sit and talk,” Kuu said, and the three of them relocated to the living room.

While Taru served them tea from an iron kettle, Kuu finally got to the point.

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“It’s been decided the kingdom and Empire will do a joint research project on a certain technology.” Kuu took a sip of his tea, and then went on in a serious tone. “They call it a ‘drill,’ I hear. From what Bro’s told me, it can be used to bore holes in hard objects.”

“A drill... Is it like the hand-turned cutting tool that carpenters use?” Taru asked.

“The one for putting holes in lumber? Well, I guess you can think of it as the bigger and more powerful version of that. For one thing, it puts holes in iron, not wood. He was saying with an even bigger model, they could punch holes through the mountains.”

“They’re... trying to make something incredible,” Taru said, awed. Being a craftsperson, she understood how amazing that technology would be.

Because this world had magic, if you had a technology that would allow you to put holes in rock and metal, “Can’t you just do it with magic?” might seem like the likely response. However, magical abilities and their power varied wildly, and only a select few could open holes of an ideal size. And once the technology was established, anyone would be able to make use of it.

Even without an appropriate mage, it would be possible to put a hole in anything. The effect that would have, not just in this country but across the world, was immeasurable.

Kuu nodded, saying, “Exactly. This technology, I want it for us, no matter what it costs. No, if anything, our country is the one that needs this technology more than any others. Our country is locked in snow and ice.”

In the frigid Republic of Turgis, in winter, the land was covered by snow and the sea in ice, making it impossible to move around. Ships couldn’t enter the frozen waters, and moving through the snow was impossible without using a large, woolly creature like a numoth.

Recently, with the introduction of the large *Roroa Maru* hovercraft from the kingdom, it had become easier to engage in trade, but the situation was still difficult.

So, what if they had a drill that could punch through rock?

“If we can open holes through the mountains, we’ll have roads that don’t need to worry about snow,” Kuu said. “If we put them on ships, we might be able to create vessels that can break the ice as we move forward. When I was saying that to Bro, he said, ‘With a rotation mechanism, you might be able to build a ski lift, too.’”

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“A lift?” Taru repeated.

“He said it was for something called... leisure skiing? If we had that, we could bring tourists into the republic... he was saying. I didn’t get it, but I intend to hear about it again in more detail next time.”

If that was one of Bro’s ideas, it was bound to be fun, Kuu reflected with a grin.

“I understand that the technology is important,” Taru said slowly. “So what is it you want to ask of me?”

Kuu slapped his knee like he’d been waiting to hear those words. “The drill is a tech our country needs. But if we try to introduce it after the kingdom and Empire have perfected it, it will cost us big time. We can’t handle that. That’s why I’ve negotiated with Bro to bring us in on the joint research project. With my old man’s permission, of course.”

Kuu was as quick to act as ever. If an idea occurred to him, he ran with it immediately.

“So, Taru, I want you to join the joint research team,” he continued.

“...Me?”

“Yeah. A knowledge of blades is going to be indispensable for this drill thing. Blacksmithing techniques are your bag, right? We’ll provide your expertise and some funding, and in return, we’ll get to join the project. Then the drill technology will be shared between the three countries.”

“The young master was amazing, you know,” Leporina put in. “The kingdom and Empire had been splitting the costs half and half between them, so he was told it would make sense for us to need to put up third, but by negotiating on the premise our country was weaker, he was able to reduce that to a fifth.”

The result was that the ratio of investment between the kingdom, Empire, and republic would be 4:4:2.

Incidentally, Kuu’s opening request had been ten percent, while Souma had wanted him to put in thirty percent, and after their long back and forth negotiations, they had finally settled on twenty percent.

“Ookeekee!” Kuu giggled. “If I’d been willing to oppose Bro, I could’ve brought him down to fifteen, though.”

“Don’t get a big head,” Leporina scolded. “Letting us only contribute twenty percent was a show of goodwill from Souma.”

“I know that. So, there you have it, Taru. Would you lend us a hand for

the sake of our country?”

Kuu extended his hand to her. His eyes lacked their usual vapidness, and were full of something like the determination of one who bore responsibility for the next generation of his country.

Taru got lost in his eyes for a moment, but eventually she took his hand.

“...Okay. I’ll cooperate.”

“Thanks. Well, I’m taking off to report in to Bro right now!”

Kuu hopped up from his seat, dashing out of the workshop as fast as he had come in.

For a moment, Taru went, “Ah,” and reached out her arm after him, but Kuu was gone before her arm could stretch. With nowhere left for it to go, Taru wrapped that arm around her chest.

“If you’re like that, the young master will go far away, you know?” Leporina put in.

As if having a sudden realization, Taru looked over at her. “Master Kuu... he’s changed a little. Did something happen in the Union of Eastern Nations?”

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“Yes. He saw a young king who was incredibly strong, with an immense power to draw people to him, and an ambition grand enough to cover the world. He was like the embodiment of the young master’s ideal ruler.”

Taru was silent.

“Because that was the young king of another country, it lit a fire in the young master’s belly. He doesn’t want to lose. That’s helped him to see things that are bigger than he could have before.” With a serious expression on her face, Leporina clenched her fist in front of her chest, as if in pain. “Don’t assume he’ll keep looking at you forever.”

“Huh?!”

“The young master is trying to move forward,” Leporina went on. “This relationship won’t stay the same forever. If you stand still, I’m sure you’ll be left behind.”

“I... I...” Taru tried to say something, but she couldn’t find the words.

Don’t assume he’ll keep looking at you forever.

Their relationship was fine as it was. A part of Taru believed that.

However, those feelings would be in Kuu’s way when he wanted to move forward. And Taru didn’t want that.

In the closed-off republic, covered in snow and ice, Kuu had smiled brighter than anyone as he drove onward. He’d done stupid things, too, but Taru had been drawn to him for that. That was why she didn’t want to do something like make Kuu stop.

While Taru hung her head, Leporina walked toward the entrance to the workshop and said, “I’ll follow the young master anywhere. Even if I’m not at the top of his attention now, I’ll get there someday. Taru... it’s about time you thought about what it is you want to do.”

Then, chasing after Kuu, she left the workshop.

Left behind, Taru continued to clench her fist for a while, but eventually raised her face.

In her eyes there was a powerful light that refused to let the other two outdo her.

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Later...

Taru was in the laboratory of the overscientist Genia Maxwell.

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“You want to change the shape of the tip?” Trill, the third princess of the Empire, tilted her head to the side, causing her hair, which was tied into a single drill, to shake. “The best swords, the best spears, and the best arrows all of these have sharp, pointed tips. Is it not a cone, where the tip is at a more acute angle, which provides the most penetrative power?”

“For a normal weapon, sure,” Taru said, boldly expressing her opinion to the one who had proposed the project in the first place. “It only needs penetrative power when it hits the enemy. But a drill functions differently. It has to be designed to work for a long time.”

Trill crossed her arms and looked at her dubiously. “...Yes, and?”

“Though a sharp tip has penetrative power, the fact that the force is concentrated on that point means it’s brittle and easily breaks. Once it’s broken, it loses that penetrative power.”

“I see... you’re certainly right about that,” Genia, who was beside them, agreed.

Trill’s doubtful look disappeared. If those were the words of Genia, the head of the House of Maxwell, whom she so respected, Trill couldn’t possibly doubt her.

“If Young Miss Genia says so, she must be right,” Trill said. “But what is it you want to do, in that case?”

Taru used chalk to draw the shape she had thought of on the blackboard. “I propose that in order to disperse the force across the contact surface, we’ll actually make the tip flat, and by covering it in countless blades, we’ll chip away things as the drill spins.”

“Well... That’s an unexpected shape.” Merula said, letting out a sigh of admiration.

Taru looked straight at her and said, “Blades are my area of expertise. I won’t let anyone beat me at it.”

Taru was there, holding her own in arguments with geniuses like Genia, Merula, and Trill about the drill.

While she explained her idea to the other three, Taru made a commitment in her heart.

I have to do my best, too... so that those two don’t leave me behind.

So that Kuu would keep looking at her forever.

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Cast of Characters Arc 5: The Shining Dragon

— One day in the 1st month, 1,548th year, Continental Calendar —

"Hmm..." Roroa muttered in consternation, her arms crossed. There was a feather pen tucked behind her ear.

She was in the staff room of a clothing store in Parnam called The Silver Deer. And not everything was as she wanted it to be.

The master of this shop, Sebastian, came in with tea for her. "What's the matter, princess?"

"I dunno what to say, Sebastian," Roroa said. "Have a look at this, would ya?"

She handed the man a number of sheets of paper.

Sebastian laid the prepared tea on the table, then took the proffered papers and looked through them. It seemed to be an expense report for the Silver Deer Trading Company.

In public, the representative of the trading company was Sebastian, but it was actually Roroa's personal company. They dealt in clothing and sundries like Sebastian's own business, The Silver Deer, but also a shipping business using the *Roroa Maru,* and management of restaurants serving dishes from Souma's former world.

"Hmm..." Sebastian spent some time reading the report, but he couldn't find anything that seemed particularly problematic.

The trade in medical supplies using the *Roroa Maru* seemed to be making a loss, but this was a national project, so it was the country that was seeing the return. That wasn't an issue for the company.

Their other endeavors were similar. In fact, despite all the pies Roroa had a finger in, she seemed to be getting some level of results from all of them. He was so surprised that it made him realize how skillful a businesswoman Roroa was all over again.

"I don't see anything here that would cause you such worry," Sebastian

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said.

"Out of all of them, which one takes the most work, and which one's makin' the most profit?"

"Would that be this 'toys and related' section?"

From what Sebastian could see, this business had a record of success for itself. Sales had grown bizarrely high for the amount of money invested.

Roroa nodded. "Ya got it. And eighty percent of those sales are comin' from *Overman Silvan* goods." Roroa counted off on her fingers as she recalled the things she'd turned into products. "Let's see, there's the Silvan Baton that Silvan swings around as he transforms, right? There are Silvan transformation costumes, rubber dolls of Silvan, Miss Dran, and Danbox, and even Silvan Cookies with Silvan's face printed on 'em."

"The cookies are one thing, but aren't those transformation costumes rather expensive?" Sebastian queried.

"Rich kids from families in the noble and knightly classes are buyin' them. I mean, we even got request from adults for adult-sized ones, and we made those into products."

"Even adults are playing with *Silvan* transformation goods in this country?" Sebastian asked, astonished.

When he imagined the usually-well-dressed gentlemen changing into *Silvan* transformation costumes in their rooms and striking poses in front of the mirror, he became seriously concerned for the country's future.

Roroa shook her head with a wry smile. "They're not usin' them for themselves. Seems like most've been buyin' them to entertain their young kids and grandchildren."

"Oh, is that it? I can see that..."

"Well, it does seem some of them are buyin' them for themselves. I mean, even Big Sis Ai had one of those rubber dolls in her room..."

Sebastian went silent.

The woman who would one day become this country's second primary queen was playing with *Silvan* dolls.

The common people might have trouble believing it, but for these two who knew Aisha's childish side, all they could do was sigh.

"So, why the long face?" Sebastian asked, trying to shift the mood. "Sales are positive, are they not?"

Roroa scratched her head. "It's just that... I'm all outta ideas. Right now,

if we put out a *Silvan* product, it sells. That's likely to continue for awhile, but we've already gone and turned near everythin' we can into a product. There's not enough variation in the products to meet the massive demand."

"That... would be frustrating, as a business person, yes."

"Right? Still, if we go and produce too many easy ideas like those cookies, it'll end up reducin' *Silvan*'s value as a product. There're already pirated copies goin' around."

Indeed, some merchants had decided that if they had some connection with *Silvan*, it would improve their sales. So they'd begun to make copies of their goods, as well as fake *Silvan* food carts (which lacked the brand, and just had a vaguely *Silvan*-ish drawing on the containers).

The imitation goods were satisfying the demand of children who couldn't afford the real deal and were willing to buy a cheap knock-off, so they couldn't clamp down on them too hard.

That was why Roroa was working with the merchants' guild to allow such things, so long as they were clearly marked as knock-offs and sold at an appropriate price.

Naturally, if anyone tried to pass off their fake goods as real, they would be prosecuted for fraud.

Roroa leaned over the table, letting out a groan. "I think we'll need to rework things to create more products. But it's not gonna be easy. The Silvan Sword we had them add before is sellin' great, but that wasn't enough to satisfy demand."

"It would be strange for him to constantly change weapons," Sebastian said.

"You're right about that. Honestly, I'm not sure what I'm gonna do..."

"*Is* there anything to do but rely on His Majesty's knowledge here?" Sebastian suggested to Roroa, who was clutching her head. "This sort of... tokusatsu program, was it? It came from His Majesty's world, correct? Might he not be aware of the products developed from them?"

"I guess that's what it'll have to be, yeah..."

"You're not overly enthused by the idea?"

"I don't want to go relyin' on Darlin' too much when it comes to runnin' the company. Money's my specialty, so I'd rather have him relyin' on me."

"What are you saying...?" Sebastian sounded exasperated. "That pride of yours isn't worth a single copper. And relying on each other is what being a

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family is about. It's the mark of a good wife to know when to have her husband indulge her."

At the talk of being a good wife, Roroa's ears perked up.

"Ya've got a point. I'm the cute, clever, well-loved kind of princess, right?"

"No, I didn't say that..."

"I must've panicked a bit when I saw Big Sis Cia with the two babies." Roroa stretched, standing up and grinning at Sebastian. "Well, I'm gonna go have Darlin' adore me and spoil me rotten."

Having said that, Roroa left with a gleeful spring in her step.

"Good grief..." Sebastian murmured, taking a sip of his warm black tea.

He watched her go.

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It was around the time things were settling down after the birth of the twins, near the end of the year and after the New Year's festivities were over.

"So, there ya have it," Roroa declared, leaning over onto my desk. "Got any good ideas?"

I stared down a pile of paper in the governmental affairs office, like I did almost every day. Then I let out a sigh. "I dunno what to tell you..."

It seemed she wanted to make business off the country's current *Silvan* boom, but most of the possible goods had already been made, and she wanted to come up with something new.

Because Roroa's company was the biggest sponsor of the production, I wanted to help, but... a new way to profit off a tokusatsu program, huh...

"Having a new weapon appear and selling that... is something we already did, isn't it?" I asked.

"We just got finished puttin' out the Silvan Sword."

"Well, we can't add a new weapon for a while, then."

In the children's programs in the other world, there was about a one cour break between new weapons being introduced. No, I guess there were shows that put out inexpensive add-ons regularly. That was because if they overdid it, the children's backers, the parents, would end up with empty wallets.

"What about starting another tokusatsu program?" I asked.

"The special effects are made usin' Ivan Juniro's magic, right? We can't

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start another one without endin' *Silvan* first. I mean, we're tryin' to ride the *Silvan* boom, so there ain't much point in startin' another program that's not *Silvan,* is there?"

"So we have to rework *Silvan,* then..." I tried to ponder how to do that.

"Hey, what were the tokusatsu programs back in your world like, Darlin'?" Roroa asked.

Well...

"They started with something like the period dramas where good punished evil, and then eventually programs for children where Something Mask or Something Man fights an evil organization became the mainstream. I based *Overman Silvan* on those sorts of heroes."

"I see, I see..."

"There were lots of developments from there, and we got metallic machine heroes, giant heroes who fight giant monsters, and sentai teams where multiple heroes fight together. With the metallic heroes and the sentai heroes, as the monsters got bigger, they'd take them on with an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth mentality where... Ah!"

"Hm? Is somethin' wrong?" Roroa cocked her head to the side, but I was thinking and didn't respond.

Yeah, I might have come up with something. A way to rework *Silvan.*

But was it possible to portray it with our current technology?

It might not be impossible, but it was going to require putting together a pretty good set to pull it off. That was going to cost a lot of money. This wasn't like monsters, where we could make them out of cardboard and play pretend. Did we have the room to make proper sets each week...?

No, hold on. Was there a need to make a set to begin with?

We had that thing that wasn't any use to our country and was just sitting in a warehouse somewhere.

If we used that... and just borrowed her power... Yeah, this might work.

"I've got it," I said. "A way to rework the program."

"Ya do?!"

I smiled wryly as I nodded to a sparkly-eyed Roroa.

"Yeah. This may seem sudden, but could you call Tomoe in here?"

"A-All right!" Roroa took off out of the room.

She always came in like a storm and left like one, too. Though the bureaucrats who came in after her smiled wryly, they were long since used to

it.

Everyone liked Roroa best the way she was.

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Two weeks later, on the day of *Overman Silvan*'s broadcast...

Today's broadcast of *Overman Silvan* was different from the very beginning.

First of all, Silvan and the rest of the cast were appearing outdoors.

It had always been shot in a studio in the castle using a room with panels for the backdrop before, but this time they were in an open field with nothing around.

In addition, the broadcast time was usually evening, but this time, they were starting early, at three in the afternoon.

Despite that, because this had been advertised in advance, and because it was a day off, there was an audience gathered.

The format was different, too. The Silvan Exercises that were popular with children were normally done at the end of the program, but today Ivan was doing them before the program in his non-transformed state.

"Good! Well done, everyone!"

Ivan Juniro, AKA Silvan, and his sister Siena had been teaching the children to exercise in what was effectively an open-air classroom, but then an unsettlingly loud laughter echoed across the area.

"Ah, ki, ki, ki! Silvan, you won't be smiling any longer!" a voice called.

"Wh-Who's there?!"

When Ivan turned, there stood a monster, with a great cloud of smoke that made it look like he was carrying darkness on his back, wearing an ogre mask and a black cape. His alarming presence made some children burst into tears.

The monster thrust out his hand, and with a voice as deep as Ii**** Shouzou, he told Iwan, "I am the head of the Black Group, the Great Evil Ogre Emperor Akki Taitei."

"Akki Taitei?!"

With a swish of his cape, Akki Taitei pointed a finger at the shocked Ivan. "You were getting full of yourself after driving off Miss Dran, so I thought I'd give you a taste of true fear, you see. That's why I've come out to see you personally."

“What?! Siena, take care of the children!” Ivan exclaimed.

“Okay, Big Brother.” Responding to his alarm, Siena evacuated with the children.

With only the two of them left on the field, Ivan and the Great Evil Ogre Emperor were staring each other down... and that was the scene Juna, Roroa, Tomoe and I were watching from out of frame.

Juna looked at Akki Taitei’s frightening form curiously as she asked, “Who is Akki Taitei? It looks like he’s really carrying darkness on his back.”

“It’s Ivan’s father, Moltov. He can use illusion magic, too, so I asked him to play the villain for us.”

“The Juniro family’s magic’s convenient for puttin’ on a tokusatsu show, after all,” Roroa grinned. “We could let them handle the whole production, don’t ya think?”

Yes, but... the Juniros were a noble family with a long history.

“It’d be hard to ask him to neglect managing his domain in order to produce a broadcast program,” I said.

“Isn’t it worth thinkin’ about? You’ve got examples like Ludwin of the House of Arcs and Genia of the House of Maxwell already. Couldn’t ya set up an environment that lets them focus entirely on making tokusatsu programs?”

“...Well, maybe. I’ll think about it, I guess.”

Ivan and Moltov were putting a lot of passion into making this tokusatsu program, and the younger sister Siena was cooperative, too. A tokusatsu family, huh...? That could be a thing.

While we were talking, Ivan transformed into Silvan.

“Here I go! Transform!”

I couldn’t make the armor parts fly around with Living Poltergeists every single time, so normally he set off a bunch of flashes and changed quickly.

I’ll skip the “Let me explain” part this time.

“Charge! Silvan!” Having finished his transformation, Silvan pointed at Akki Taitei. “For as long as I exist, things will never go your way!”

“Ah, ki, ki, ki. You fool who doesn’t understand the difference in power between us. Despair at my overwhelming magic! Ah, ki, ki, ki, ki!”

I watched in amused silence.

For all his frowns when we’d offered him the villain role, Moltov was surprisingly into it. Well, being Ivan’s father, perhaps it was just in his blood.

Swinging a great staff upward, Akki Taitei bellowed, “Come forth, the great demon beast, Death Rhino!”

Behind Akki Taitei a great darkness expanded, covering the whole area.

That was when I gave Tomoe the signal.

“Okay, Tomoe, we’re counting on you.”

“Okay. It’s time, Mr. Rhinosaurus.”

“Gauh!”

When Tomoe spoke to it, the rhinosaurus that had been behind me waiting for its cue trudged toward Silvan and the rest.

He was a mellow rhinosaurus that usually helped us pull the train, but now there were spikes attached all over its body, and the specially-made armor that hid his beady little eyes made him look exactly like a Death Rhino should.

In human terms, this was like putting a wishy-washy guy in post-apocalyptic cosplay, but he was a beast to begin with, so he looked the part.

When the darkness cleared, Death Rhino stood before Silvan.

With a cry of surprise, Silvan’s head flew back in shock. “Wh-What is this monstrous beast?!”

“Ah, ki, ki, ki! With my magical prowess, tainting a gentle rhinosaurus’s heart with evil is simple! Now, do it, Death Rhino! Squash Silvan!”

“Grrrrrr.”

“Gwahhhh!”

With a snort and a slight push of Death Rhino’s nose, Silvan went flying.

Ivan flew pretty far. He’s holding back, right? I worried despite myself.

“It’s okay,” Juna explained. “Ivan went flying on his own.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. It seemed like having to replace him with Silvan 2 due to actor injury... was not something we’d have to do this time.

Now then, Silvan had continuously won against human-sized opponents, but there was nothing he could do against a foe this beastly.

The people watching this broadcast must surely be waiting with bated breath to see how he’d win against this thing.

“Argh! Is there nothing left I can do?!”

On the field, Silvan who could do nothing against Death Rhino, punched the ground in frustration.

Silvan’s heart was breaking... but then it happened.

A new voice echoed across the field. “Don’t give up, Ivan. No, Overman

Silvan!”

It made Silvan look up to heaven. “That voice... Father?!”

It was the voice of his father, who was supposed to be dead.

It might be hard to get this since Ivan himself was playing the role, but the story was that Ivan’s (Silvan’s) father had been killed by the Black Group.

Incidentally, the one providing the voice was his actual father Moltov. When Moltov, who had been playing Akki Taitei, released his darkness, he moved off screen and began talking to Ivan through a megaphone.

“Hey, Darlin’,” Roroa objected. “Isn’t it a bit of a stretch to have the same person playin’ both his dead father and Akki Taitei?”

She was grasping her temples with an I-can’t-keep-up look on her face.

“Well, it’s probably fine,” I said, and laughed it off. “The powerful enemy was actually his father who he thought was dead... is a development I’ve seen plenty of. Akki Taitei has a good heart and an evil heart inside him, and now the good heart of his father has come out to talk to him. If we go with something like that, don’t you think it makes the story deeper?”

“Hm... It seems too haphazard, though...” Roroa cocked her head to the side, apparently not convinced.

Well, it wasn’t like I didn’t understand how she felt. Those tokusatsu programs from the early days had probably been made while experimenting like this.

Then Moltov (the voice from the heavens) made a declaration to Silvan.

“I thought this might happen, so I’ve prepared a new power for you. A mechanical dragon of justice that will be your partner and defend the smiles of children.”

“The defender of children’s smiles... The mechanical dragon of justice...” Silvan whispered.

“Now, stand up, and call that name,” the voice from heaven commanded.

It was time for the star to take the stage.

“Juna, are you ready?” I asked.

“Anytime.”

“Okay. Well, then... let’s do this.”

“Got it, Dad!” Silvan cried. “Okay... Come!”

My voice overlapped with Silvan’s.

““Mechadra!””

Clank...

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The next moment, the sparkling silver metallic dragon stood up with a metallic clanking.

Now that we had a real dragon skeleton, this mechanical dragon made from metal parts and materials from monsters, Mechadra, had been gathering dust in Genia's workshop for a long time now.

This was my idea for reworking *Silvan.* We would recreate the battle between a robot and a monster that had blown up to giant size that took place about twenty minutes into an episode of a sentai show.

Normally, these scenes needed to be shot on a set with miniatures, making a human-sized robot and monster look massive. However, making that sort of miniature set cost a lot of money.

So, rather than make a miniature set, I figured, why not have an actual giant robot and monster duke it out?

Mechadra couldn't transform and combine, but it looked robot-like, and with my power, Living Poltergeists, I could make it move.

Also, this world had other giant creatures, and with Tomoe's power, I could ask them to perform.

By having the two of them fight, I could replicate a giant robot battle scene.

Mechadra walked with slow, heavy steps, getting in between Silvan and Death Rhino. And so, the mechanical dragon sparkling in the light of day appeared on the broadcast.

Then, at that exact moment, an orchestra began to play a powerful tune, and Juna and the chorus began to sing as if on cue.

It was Mechadra's theme song.

The Sparkling Dragon of Conquest

(Lyrics: Souma Kazuya; Music: Juna Doma)

Bathed in the light that has broken the night, its steel body shines.
Look up when you're in pain! The guardian of the world has risen!
Iron! (Bite!) Tail! (Whip!) Crushing evil!
Dragon! (Flame!) Spark! (Tornado!) Burning evil!
The sparkling dragon of conquest, Me-cha-dra!

"Were you the one who wrote those lyrics, Darlin'?" Roroa asked.

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“Don’t ask. I’m tired, okay?”

I felt a little embarrassed. I’d written those lyrics while busy with my duties through a combination of impulse, inertia, and a general impression of, “This was what tokusatsu songs sounded like, right?”

Thanks to Juna making a heroic theme for it, it had just barely shaped up into something reasonable.

The bits where Juna and the chorus took turns calling out the attack name worked well, too.

Though, when it came to the Spark Tornado, there was just a name right now, and I hadn’t decided on what kind of attack it was yet...

This sort of heroic song didn’t suit Juna, but I didn’t have time to ask anyone else, so I’d asked her to sing it this time. Maybe I’d have Margarita do it next time.

Regardless, after showing off its impressive form with a heroic song, Silvan jumped onto Mechadra’s lowered head.

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Once it was sure Silvan was aboard, Mechadra raised its head quickly. Silvan was rapidly lifted about eighteen meters.

Though there was equipment to fix his feet in place, it was frightening seeing him on what looked like a screaming thrill ride. However, Silvan went on performing like it was nothing.

“Akki Taitei!” Silvan roared. “Mechadra and I will crush your ambitions!”

Come to think of it, Ivan had performed a dynamic entrance from a high place the first time I’d met him, too, hadn’t he? They say idiots and smoke... No, he was probably good at working in high places. I was sure of it.

“Go, Mechadra!” Silvan called.

In time with Silvan’s voice, I had Mechadra imitate a roar and charge at Death Rhino. The two wrestled in a test of strength.

Maybe it was because of the dragon bones used in Mechadra’s construction, but Mechadra was more powerful than I’d expected. If I didn’t hold back, I’d send Death Rhino flying in no time.

“Grrrrrr!” Death Rhino cried.

(Clank, clank!) was Mechadra’s response.

Once the two had pushed back and forth for a while, I looked for an appropriate time to give Tomoe the signal.

When Tomoe raised her arms and waved them around, Death Rhino collapsed with a thud. Then Silvan immediately gave the order.

“Mechadra! Iron Bite!”

Mechadra bit Death Rhino’s head lightly, pulling off his helmet. With the helmet removed, Death Rhino suddenly calmed down, and cowered where he was.

This was to portray that Death Rhino was a mere rhinosaurus being controlled by Akki Taitei, and removing the helmet had set him free.

When Silvan saw that Death Rhino had quieted down, he turned to Akki Taitei, who had returned to where he was standing before at some point, and declared, “Did you see that, Akki Taitei?! This is my power, and Mechadra’s!”

“Curse you, Silvan!” Akki Taitei yelled. “I’ll withdraw for now, but I swear I’ll be back for your head!”

Leaving those words behind, Akki Taitei disappeared into a puff of smoky darkness that suddenly arose.

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Silvan tried to give chase, but when the smoke cleared, Akki Taitei was gone.

Silvan looked up to the heavens and announced, “Akki Taitei easily manipulated that gentle rhinosaurus. What a terrifying enemy. However, for as long as Mechadra and I exist, we will always foil the Black Group’s schemes!”

Then Mechadra slowly rose up in front of where Silvan was looking...

...and that was how the broadcast ended.

The program normally closed out with the Silvan Energy Exercises, but we had done them first this time, so now there were none.

While everyone was preparing to leave, I talked to Roroa.

“How was it, Roroa? Think this is fine as a rework?”

“Hmm, I can’t say until I see how the people are reactin’ to it, but... Yeah, sure, why not? Toys of Mechadra and monsters like Death Rhino’ll probably sell. I think I can do some good merchandisin’. Thanks, Darlin’.”

Roroa embraced me with a broad smile. I was glad I’d somehow managed to meet her expectations.

Then Juna came over. “Hmm,” she had her head cocked to the side. “But, sire, won’t shooting it like this every time be a lot of trouble?”

“Oh, yeah, that’s right,” Roroa said. “If we don’t have enemies other than rhinosauruses, it’s gonna be hard makin’ merchandise, too. What other opponents were you thinkin’ of?”

I wracked my brains. “As for other creatures Tomoe’s ability could handle, there are wyverns and sea dragons, I guess. The shoujou are too small. Also, we could try having them fight Genia’s golems. Naden and Ruby’s dragon forms would work, but... if I make Naden a villain, Liscia’s bound to get angry.”

“You’d be makin’ the future second secondary queen play a villain, after all,” Roroa said. “We could try makin’ the same creatures look like different ones with accessories and such, but ya can’t overdo it.”

“True... Maybe it’s safest to have the giant robot battles only once every second month.”

With us having confirmed that, the day came to an end.

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Later on, that giant robot battle became a huge topic in the kingdom.

Like Roroa had predicted, Mechadra toys, and even monster toys, flew off the shelves.

However, because of that, there were an incredible number of requests to see more of Mechadra's powerful body.

In the end, we had giant robot battles once a month, and most the money made on merchandise went into accessories to put on the monsters.

"It's no good," Roroa sighed. "We may not be takin' a loss, but we ain't makin' enough of a profit, either."

"This business is totally living paycheck-to-paycheck, yeah."

"Do... we have to keep doin' this forever?" Roroa complained.

"It might be best to just give in and make a Mechadra costume and set, you know?"

Yes, the tokusatsu program had become a headache for Souma and Roroa once again.

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Epilogue 2: Welcome Home

— 11:00 in the morning on the 1st day of the 2nd month, 1,548th year, Continental Calendar — Parnam Castle —

On this day, I was with my family in the courtyard: my fiancées of Aisha, Juna, Roroa, and Naden, along with my little sister Tomoe and her friends Ichiha and Yuriga.

It was a cold day, but the skies were clear.

We were just staring into the open blue sky.

Ahh, I couldn't calm down! I was restless and on edge. Time seemed to be flying by so fast.

My feet seemed to be floating off the ground, and even when I came to a stop, my heels would lift up for no reason.

In my head, I wanted to be calm, but my body and heart weren't listening.

"Oh, geez! Calm down a little, would you?!" Unable to watch me any longer, Naden complained. "You've been acting too restless all this time. If you're a king, act more dignified."

"Nadie's right," Roroa said, hugging Naden from behind. "They'll come back, whether you're actin' impatient or not."

"Hey, Roroa, don't hug me." Naden tried to pry the nuisance off of her, but it had no effect.

"It's fine, it's fine!" Roroa said, playing around by clinging to her.

They were right, but... Still, I was beside myself with worry, so what else could I do? After all, today...

"Your fiancée and children who were visiting family come back today, right? Why do you have to be so tense?" Yuriga said, sounding exasperated.

That was right. Today was the day Liscia and the children would be returning to the castle.

I couldn't go to pick her up because of my duties as the king, but the royal family's wyvern gondola had already been sent for her. I had received word she'd be arriving soon, so we'd all come to greet her.

Yuriga shrugged her shoulders in resignation. "Besides, I've never even

met this Lady Liscia person."

"Isn't that all the more reason you should pay your respects?" Tomoe shot back. "You and Ichiha are going to live in this castle, so you have to say hello to Big Sister, okay?"

"I... I know that." Yuriga turned her head to look away.

With a wry smile at their antics, Ichiha curiously asked, "She's the daughter of the former royal couple, and was the princess of Elfrieden, right? What is she like?"

"A gallant and beautiful princess," Tomoe said confidently. "She's the big sister I look up to."

"If you want gallant, my brother is more than a match for her," Yuriga scoffed.

"Murgh... You're always so competitive, Yuriga!" Tomoe glared.

Ichiha quickly got in between them. "N-Now, now, both of you calm down."

These kids were the same as ever.

Aisha, who had the best vision of anyone here, pointed into the sky and said, "It looks like they're here."

Spinning around to search where Aisha was pointing, I could see a gondola drawn by four wyverns coming toward us.

There was an escort of wyvern cavalry alongside it, too.

The gondola slowly approached, and eventually set down in the courtyard.

Once an attendant opened the door, Liscia in her usual uniform and Carla in her regular maid dress stepped out, each carrying a baby.

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“We’re home, Souma, everyone,” Liscia said to all of us with a smile.

Her slightly longer than shoulder-length hair blew in the wind and sparkled.

It was my dear children and a woman I loved. I couldn’t help but stare at this scene, which was like happiness made manifest.

Eventually I came back to my senses, and rushed over to their side along with my fiancées.

“Welcome home, Liscia,” I said. “Sorry I couldn’t go pick you up.”

“Welcome home, Lady Liscia,” Aisha smiled. “I was eagerly awaiting your return.”

“Hee hee, it looks like the babies are sleeping,” Juna giggled.

“Ya got that right,” Roroa grinned. “Which of them’s the boy, and which is the girl?”

“The one Liscia is holding is the girl, and the one Carla is holding is the boy,” said Naden. “I can sort of tell by their magic.”

All of us were speaking to Liscia at once.

“Geez,” she said with a troubled smile. “I’m happy for the welcome, but calm down, all of you.”

Carla walked over to me and handed over the baby she was holding. “I have returned, master. Please take the young prince.”

“Welcome home, Carla,” I said, reaching out for the boy. “Good work guarding Liscia and keeping her company. But... when you call him the young prince, it suddenly makes me feel old. I mean, it’s not wrong, though.”

Even as I said that, I took my child, and...

“Wah...? Ahhhh!”

He suddenly burst out crying. Huh?! What was this, out of nowhere?!

I panicked, and tried to calm him with a, “There, there,” but there was no sign he was going to stop crying.

Even when everyone joined in with a, “What’s the matter,” and a, “Peekaboo!” nothing helped.

We were at a loss for what to do.

“Let Carla hold him,” Liscia suggested with a wry smile.

When I handed him back to Carla like I was told, the boy immediately stopped crying. Then, just like that, he dozed off again.

With an incredible look of relaxation. Was he that much happier in Carla’s arms than his own father’s?

“It seems he likes it in Carla’s arms,” Liscia said. “Sometimes he won’t stop crying while I handle him, but when Carla does it, he will.”

“As a parent, I’m getting jealous of Carla...” I complained.

“Th-There isn’t anything I can do about it, you know?!” Carla, who was getting flack for something that wasn’t her fault, protested, but she couldn’t blame us.

Liscia walked over to the three kids who were a little ways away. “You must be Ichiha from the Duchy of Chima, and you must be Yuriga from Malmkhitan. I’ve heard about both of you from Souma. Welcome to the Kingdom of Friedonia.”

“N-Nice to meet you,” Ichiha said nervously. “I’m the youngest son of the House of Chima, Ichiha Chima.”

“I’m... Yuriga. It’s... a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

With Liscia suddenly talking to them, both the kids seemed a little tense.

With Ichiha, that was only to be expected, but wasn’t Yuriga being a little too tense? Her earlier bravado was gone entirely.

“What’s wrong, Yuriga?” Tomoe asked. “You’re all stiff.”

She seemed to find Yuriga’s reaction a mystery, too.

“Wh-What are you saying?” Yuriga shot back. “I am acting absolutely normal.”

“Are you?”

“Of course I am. You little squirt.”

“H-Hey, shtop thaaaat.”

Yuriga was stretching Tomoe’s cheeks again.

Seeing Yuriga like that, Liscia chuckled. “From what I’ve heard from Souma, you’re even more of a tomboy than that.”

“N-No, not at all...”

“They called me a tomboy princess, too, so I can relate,” Liscia said with a big smile. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Yuriga nodded quickly.

Oh, I got it. Because they were so similar, Yuriga might have gotten tense when she’d sensed the same sort of air she herself gave off.

It had felt like a bigger version of herself had shown up, the way you feel when an older cousin suddenly addresses you.

“Hey, Darlin’? I had a question,” Roroa said while pulling on the cheeks of the baby Carla was holding. “Do they have names already? I feel bad if

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you're just gonna keep callin' them 'the boy' and 'the girl' forever, ya know?"

"Hm? Ohh, I hadn't told you yet. We did name them. Right, Liscia?"

"Yes. We decided Souma would name the boy, and I would name the girl."

As Liscia, Carla and I stood in a line, we announced the children's names to everyone.

First, the boy Carla was holding.

"This is Cian," I said. "It seems like a lot of people use names that are close to their parents in this country, and he's likely to rule this country as a blood relative of the Elfrieden royal family someday, so I gave him a name that established his link to Liscia."

"Hee hee, Cian, is it? Well, that's close to cyan, which means blue, so I can relate," the blue-haired Juna said happily.

It seemed everyone liked the name, so... honestly, I was relieved.

Liscia showed the girl she was holding to everyone and said, "And for this girl's name, I chose Kazuha."

"Kazuha? Hey, you ended up choosin' a name that sounds kinda like Tomoe or Kaede's, huh?" Roroa asked.

"She's right, it does have the same sort of sound as my name," Tomoe said, giggling.

Yeah, but why did she choose that name? I wondered.

Liscia, with a soft smile, explained the origin of it.

"You know, because of a mistake early on, he ended up being called Souma, but Souma's actual first name is Kazuya, right? When we're married and he inherits the names of Amidonia and Elfrieden, he'll be Souma A. Elfrieden, right?"

"Yeah," I said. "That's what we decided on, right."

"I felt sad knowing the name Kazuya would just disappear like that, so I gave this girl the name Kazuha. I thought I'd leave some proof that the name Kazuya did once exist," Liscia said with a smile.

She'd chosen the name Kazuha out of consideration for me? Oh, crap. I was getting misty eyes.

If I burst into tears here, it'd be lame, so I held it in as well as I could.

"Kazuha, you say?" Aisha asked. "I think that's a cute name."

"I think it's great," Naden agreed. "It feels like a name from Souma's

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world.”

It was kind of them to say that.

In the end, I had given a boy a name like Liscia’s, and Liscia had given a girl a name like mine.

It might seem too simple, but... you could feel a definite bond there, so we liked it. Hopefully the kids would like their names, too.

And so, turning around and pointing to the castle for the twins, I said, “Cian, Kazuha, can you see it? This is your home starting today.”

“They’re both asleep, so of course they can’t,” Liscia teased me.

Everyone laughed.

As I scratched my head in embarrassment, Liscia walked over to stand beside me.

“I was away for a while, but I see the castle’s more lively than ever.”

“We’ve got more family, and you’re back now, too, Liscia,” I smiled.

“Hee hee. And there are going to be even more new members after this, right?”

“I’m happy to have more kids, but I think I’ve got enough fiancées,” I said.

“I don’t know about that. Knowing you, you might just go with the flow again, right?”

“I can’t... deny that.”

I had a record here, after all. Like with Roroa, or with Naden.

While we were talking about that, Liscia leaned her head onto my shoulder. “No matter what happens after this, I’m sure we can overcome it.”

“You’re right.” I nodded. “If everyone’s with us, we definitely can.”

We smiled together, listening to the happy voices of our companions.

The spring, which would mark two years after I had been given the crown, was almost upon us.

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by Dojyomaru

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